

ENGLT 331: AFRICAN- AMERICAN LITERATURE (1730-1930)



Staff
Sacramento City College

ENGLT 331: African-American Literature
(1730-1930)

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Licensing

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1: CHAPTER 1

1.1: A New Generation

1.2: The Slavery Controversy and Abolitionist Literature

1.1: A New Generation

The 1920s was a time of dramatic change in the United States. Many young people, especially those living in big cities, embraced a new morality that was much more permissive than that of previous generations. They listened to jazz music, especially in the nightclubs of Harlem. Although prohibition outlawed alcohol, criminal bootlegging and importing businesses thrived. The decade was not a pleasure cruise for everyone, however; in the wake of the Great War, many were left awaiting the promise of a new generation.

A New Morality

Many Americans were disillusioned in the post-World War I era, and their reactions took many forms. Rebellious American youth, in particular, adjusted to the changes by embracing a new morality that was far more permissive than the social mores of their parents. Many young women of the era shed their mother's morality and adopted the dress and mannerisms of a flapper, the Jazz Age female stereotype, seeking the endless party. Flappers wore shorter skirts, shorter hair, and more makeup, and they drank and smoked with the boys (Figure 1.1.1). Flappers' dresses emphasized straight lines from the shoulders to the knees, minimizing breasts and curves while highlighting legs and ankles. The male equivalent of a flapper was a **"sheik,"** although that term has not remained as strong in the American vernacular. At the time, however, many of these fads became a type of conformity, especially among college-aged youths, with the signature bob haircut of the flapper becoming almost universal—in both the United States and overseas.



Figure 1.1.1: The flapper look, seen here in “Flapper” by Ellen Pyle for the cover of *The Saturday Evening Post* in February 1922, was a national craze in American cities during the 1920s.

As men and women pushed social and cultural boundaries in the Jazz Age, sexual mores changed and social customs grew more permissive. “Petting parties” or “necking parties” became the rage on college campuses. Psychologist Sigmund Freud and British “sexologist” Havelock Ellis emphasized that sex was a natural and pleasurable part of the human experience. Margaret Sanger, the founder of Planned Parenthood, launched an information campaign on birth control to give women a choice in the realm in which suffrage had changed little—the family. The popularization of contraception and the private space that the automobile offered to teenagers and unwed couples also contributed to changes in sexual behavior.

Flappers and sheiks also took their cues from the high-flying romances they saw on movie screens and confessions in movie magazines of immorality on movie sets. Movie posters promised: “Brilliant men, beautiful jazz babies, champagne baths, midnight revels, petting parties in the purple dawn, all ending in one terrific smashing climax that makes you gasp.” And “neckers, petters, white kisses, red kisses, pleasure-mad daughters, sensation-craving mothers . . . the truth: bold, naked, sensational.”

EXPLORE

Could you go “on a toot” with flappers and sheiks? Improve your chances with [this collection of Jazz Age slang](#).

New dances and new music—especially jazz—also characterized the Jazz Age. Born out of the African American community, jazz was a uniquely American music. The innovative sound emerged from a number of different communities and from a number of different musical traditions such as blues and ragtime. By the 1920s, jazz had spread from African American clubs in New Orleans and Chicago to reach greater popularity in New York and abroad. One New York jazz establishment, the Cotton Club, became particularly famous and attracted large audiences of hip, young, and white flappers and sheiks to see black entertainers play jazz (Figure 1.1.2).



Figure 1.1.2: Black jazz bands such as the King and Carter Jazzing Orchestra, photographed in 1921 by Robert Runyon, were immensely popular among white urbanites in the 1920s.

The "New Woman"

The Jazz Age and the proliferation of the flapper lifestyle of the 1920s should not be seen merely as the product of postwar disillusionment and newfound prosperity. Rather, the search for new styles of dress and new forms of entertainment like jazz was part of a larger women's rights movement. The early 1920s, especially with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment guaranteeing full voting rights to women, was a period that witnessed the expansion of women's political power. The public flaunting of social and sexual norms by flappers represented an attempt to match gains in political equality with gains in the social sphere. Women were increasingly leaving the Victorian era norms of the previous generation behind, as they broadened the concept of women's liberation to include new forms of social expression such as dance, fashion, women's clubs, and forays into college and the professions.

Nor did the struggle for women's rights through the promotion and passage of legislation cease in the 1920s. In 1921, Congress passed the Promotion of the Welfare and Hygiene of Maternity and Infancy Act, also known as the Sheppard-Towner Act, which earmarked \$1.25 million for well-baby clinics and educational programs, as well as nursing. This funding dramatically reduced the rate of infant mortality. Two years later, in 1923, Alice Paul drafted and promoted an Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) that promised to end all sex discrimination by guaranteeing that “Men and women shall have equal rights throughout the United States and every place subject to its jurisdiction.”

Yet, ironically, at precisely the time when the Progressive movement was achieving its long-sought-after goals, the movement itself was losing steam and the Progressive Era was coming to a close. As the heat of Progressive politics grew less intense, voter participation from both sexes declined over the course of the 1920s. After the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, many women believed that they had accomplished their goals and dropped out of the movement. As a result, the proposed ERA stalled (the ERA eventually passed Congress almost fifty years later in 1972, but then failed to win ratification by a sufficient number of states), and, by the end of the 1920s, Congress even allowed funding for the Sheppard-Towner Act to lapse.

The growing lethargy toward women's rights was happening at a time when an increasing number of women were working for wages in the U.S. economy—not only in domestic service, but in retail, healthcare and education, offices, and manufacturing. Beginning in the 1920s, women's participation in the labor force increased steadily. However, most were paid less than men for the same type of work based on the rationale that they did not have to support a family. While the employment of single and unmarried women had largely won social acceptance, married women often suffered the stigma that they were working for pin money—frivolous additional discretionary income.

The Harlem Renaissance and the New Negro

It wasn't only women who found new forms of expression in the 1920s. African Americans were also expanding their horizons and embracing the concept of the "new Negro." The decade witnessed the continued Great Migration of African Americans to the North, with over half a million fleeing the strict Jim Crow laws of the South. Life in the northern states, as many African Americans discovered, was hardly free of discrimination and segregation. Even without Jim Crow, businesses, property owners, employers, and private citizens typically practiced *de facto* segregation, which could be quite stifling and oppressive. Nonetheless, many southern blacks continued to move north into segregated neighborhoods that were already bursting at the seams, because the North, at the very least, offered two tickets toward black progress: schools and the vote. The black population of New York City doubled during the decade. As a result, Harlem, a neighborhood at the northern end of Manhattan, became a center for Afro-centric art, music, poetry, and politics. Political expression in the Harlem of the 1920s ran the gamut, as some leaders advocated a return to Africa, while others fought for inclusion and integration.

Revived by the wartime migration and fired up by the white violence of the postwar riots, urban blacks developed a strong cultural expression in the 1920s that came to be known as the Harlem Renaissance. In this rediscovery of black culture, African American artists and writers formulated an independent black culture and encouraged racial pride, rejecting any emulation of white American culture. Claude McKay's poem "If We Must Die" called on African Americans to start fighting back in the wake of the Red Summer riots of 1919 (Figure 1.1.3). Langston Hughes, often nicknamed the "poet laureate" of the movement, invoked sacrifice and the just cause of civil rights in "The Colored Soldier," while another author of the movement, Zora Neale Hurston, celebrated the life and dialect of rural blacks in a fictional, all-black town in Florida. Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was only published posthumously in 1937.



Figure 1.1.3: The Jamaican-born poet and novelist Claude McKay articulated the new sense of self and urban community of African Americans during the Harlem Renaissance. Although centered in the Harlem neighborhood of Manhattan, this cultural movement emerged in urban centers throughout the Northeast and Midwest.

The new Negro found political expression in a political ideology that celebrated African Americans distinct national identity. This Negro nationalism, as some referred to it, proposed that African Americans had a distinct and separate national heritage that should inspire pride and a sense of community. An early proponent of such nationalism was W. E. B. Du Bois. One of the founders of the NAACP, a brilliant writer and scholar, and the first African American to earn a Ph.D. from Harvard, Du Bois openly rejected assumptions of white supremacy. His conception of Negro nationalism encouraged Africans to work together in support of their own interests, promoted the elevation of black literature and cultural expression, and, most famously, embraced the African

continent as the true homeland of all ethnic Africans—a concept known as Pan-Africanism.

Taking Negro nationalism to a new level was Marcus Garvey. Like many black Americans, the Jamaican immigrant had become utterly disillusioned with the prospect of overcoming white racism in the United States in the wake of the postwar riots and promoted a “Back to Africa” movement. To return African Americans to a presumably more welcoming home in Africa, Garvey founded the **Black Star Steamship Line**. He also started the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which attracted thousands of primarily lower-income working people. UNIA members wore colorful uniforms and promoted the doctrine of a “negritude” that reversed the color hierarchy of white supremacy, prizing blackness and identifying light skin as a mark of inferiority. Intellectual leaders like Du Bois, whose lighter skin put him low on Garvey’s social order, considered the UNIA leader a charlatan. Garvey was eventually imprisoned for mail fraud and then deported, but his legacy set the stage for Malcolm X and the Black Power movement of the 1960s.

Prohibition

At precisely the same time that African Americans and women were experimenting with new forms of social expression, the country as a whole was undergoing a process of austere and dramatic social reform in the form of alcohol prohibition. After decades of organizing to reduce or end the consumption of alcohol in the United States, temperance groups and the Anti-Saloon League finally succeeded in pushing through the Eighteenth Amendment in 1919, which banned the manufacture, sale, and transportation of intoxicating liquors (Figure 1.1.4). The law proved difficult to enforce, as illegal alcohol soon poured in from Canada and the Caribbean, and rural Americans resorted to home-brewed “moonshine.” The result was an eroding of respect for law and order, as many people continued to drink illegal liquor. Rather than bringing about an age of sobriety, as Progressive reformers had hoped, it gave rise to a new subculture that included illegal importers, interstate smuggling (or bootlegging), clandestine saloons referred to as “speakeasies,” hipflasks, cocktail parties, and the organized crime of trafficking liquor.

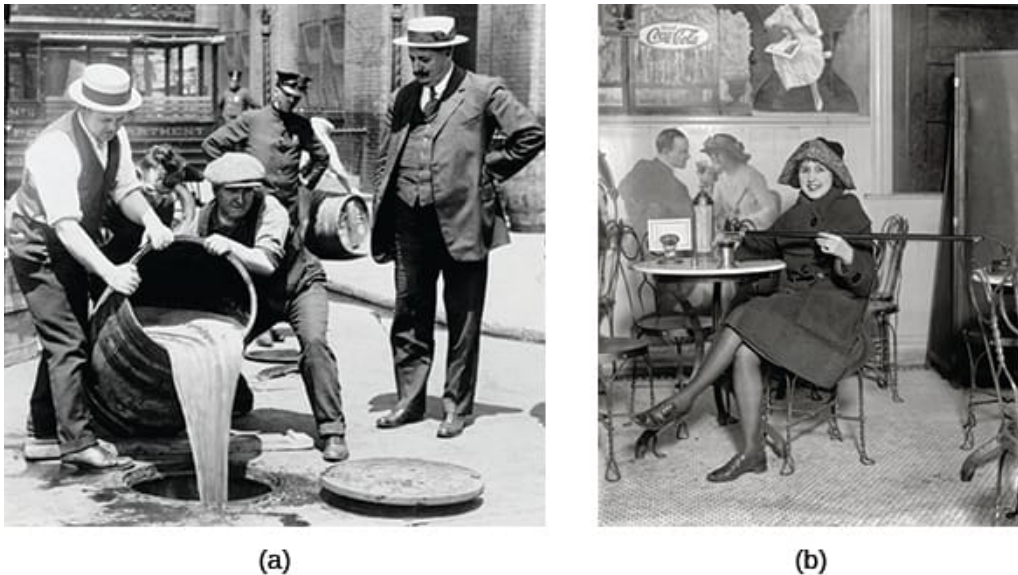


Figure 1.1.4: While forces of law and order confiscated and discarded alcohol when they found it (a), consumers found ingenious ways of hiding liquor during prohibition, such as this cane that served as a flask (b).

Prohibition also revealed deep political divisions in the nation. The Democratic Party found itself deeply divided between urban, northern “wets” who hated the idea of abstinence, and rural, southern “dries” who favored the amendment. This divided the party and opened the door for the Republican Party to gain ascendancy in the 1920s. All politicians, including Woodrow Wilson, Herbert Hoover, Robert La Follette, and Franklin D. Roosevelt, equivocated in their support for the law. Publicly, they catered to the Anti-Saloon League; however, they failed to provide funding for enforcement.

Prohibition sparked a rise in organized crime. “Scarface” Al Capone (Figure 1.1.5) ran an extensive bootlegging and criminal operation known as the Chicago Outfit or Chicago mafia. By 1927, Capone’s organization included a number of illegal activities including bootlegging, prostitution, gambling, loan sharking, and even murder. His operation was earning him more than \$100 million annually, and many local police were on his payroll. Although he did not have a monopoly on crime, his organizational structure was better than many other criminals of his era. His liquor trafficking business and his Chicago soup kitchens during the Great Depression led some Americans to liken Capone to a modern-day Robin Hood. Still, Capone was eventually imprisoned

for eleven years for tax evasion, including a stint in California's notorious Alcatraz prison.



Figure 1.1.5: Al Capone, pictured here in his U.S. Department of Justice mug shot, was convicted of tax fraud and sent to prison in 1931.

The Lost Generation

As the country struggled with the effects and side-effects of prohibition, many young intellectuals endeavored to come to grips with a lingering sense of disillusionment. World War I, fundamentalism, and the Red Scare—a pervasive American fear of Communist infiltrators prompted by the success of the Bolshevik Revolution—all left their mark on these intellectuals. Known as the Lost Generation, writers like F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Sinclair Lewis, Edith Wharton, and John Dos Passos expressed their hopelessness and despair by skewering the middle class in their work. They felt alienated from society, so they tried to escape (some literally) to criticize it. Many lived an expatriate life in Paris for the decade, although others went to Rome or Berlin.

The Lost Generation writer that best exemplifies the mood of the 1920s was F. Scott Fitzgerald, now considered one of the most influential writers of the twentieth century. His debut novel, *This Side of Paradise*, describes a generation of youth “grown up to find all gods dead, all wars fought, all faith in man shaken.” *The Great Gatsby*, published in 1925, exposed the doom that always follows the fun, fast-lived life. Fitzgerald depicted the modern millionaire Jay Gatsby living a profligate life: unscrupulous, coarse, and in love with another man's wife. Both Fitzgerald and his wife Zelda lived this life as well, squandering the money he made from his writing.

MY STORY: F. SCOTT FITZGERALD ON THE 1920S

In the 1920s, Fitzgerald was one of the most celebrated authors of his day, publishing *This Side of Paradise*, *The Beautiful and Damned*, and *The Great Gatsby* in quick succession. However, his profligate lifestyle with his wife Zelda sapped their funds, and Fitzgerald had to struggle to maintain their lavish lifestyle. Below is an excerpt from “The Crack-Up,” a personal essay by Fitzgerald originally published in *Esquire* in which he describes his “good life” during the 1920s.

It seemed a romantic business to be a successful literary man—you were not ever going to be as famous as a movie star but what note you had was probably longer-lived; you were never going to have the power of a man of strong political or religious convictions but you were certainly more independent. Of course within the practice of your trade you were forever unsatisfied—but I, for one, would not have chosen any other.

As the Twenties passed, with my own twenties marching a little ahead of them, my two juvenile regrets—at not being big enough (or good enough) to play football in college, and at not getting overseas during the war—resolved themselves into childish waking dreams of imaginary heroism that were good enough to go to sleep on in restless nights. The big problems of life seemed to solve themselves, and if the business of fixing them was difficult, it made one too tired to think of more general problems.

—F. Scott Fitzgerald, “The Crack-Up,” 1936

How does Fitzgerald describe his life in the 1920s? How did his interpretation reflect the reality of the decade?

Equally idiosyncratic and disillusioned was writer Ernest Hemingway (Figure 1.1.6). He lived a peripatetic and adventurous lifestyle in Europe, Cuba, and Africa, working as an ambulance driver in Italy during World War I and traveling to Spain in the 1930s to cover the civil war there. His experiences of war and tragedy stuck with him, emerging in colorful scenes in his novels *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), and *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940). In 1952, his novella, *The Old Man and the Sea*, won the Pulitzer Prize. Two years later, he won the Nobel Prize in Literature for this book and his overall influence on contemporary style.



Figure 1.1.6: Ernest Hemingway was one of the most prominent members of the Lost Generation who went to live as expatriates in Europe during the 1920s.

EXPLORE

Listen to [an audio of Hemingway's Nobel Prize acceptance speech](#).

Not all Lost Generation writers were like Fitzgerald or Hemingway. The writing of Sinclair Lewis, rather than expressing a defined disillusionment, was more influenced by the Progressivism of the previous generation. In *Babbitt* (1922), he examined the “sheep following the herd” mentality that conformity promoted. He satirized American middle-class life as pleasure-seeking and mindless. Similarly, writer Edith Wharton celebrated life in old New York, a vanished society, in *The Age of Innocence*, in 1920. Wharton came from a very wealthy, socialite family in New York, where she was educated by tutors and never attended college. She lived for many years in Europe; during the Great War, she worked in Paris helping women establish businesses.

Section Summary

Different groups reacted to the upheavals of the 1920s in different ways. Some people, especially young urbanites, embraced the new amusements and social venues of the decade. Women found new opportunities for professional and political advancement, as well as new models of sexual liberation; however, the women's rights movement began to wane with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. For black artists of the Harlem Renaissance, the decade was marked less by leisure and consumption than by creativity and purpose. African American leaders like Marcus Garvey and W. E. B. Du Bois responded to the retrenched racism of the time with different campaigns for civil rights and black empowerment. Others, like the writers of the Lost Generation, reveled in exposing the hypocrisies and shallowness of mainstream middle-class culture. Meanwhile, the passage of prohibition served to increase the illegal production of alcohol and led to a rise in organized crime.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. The popularization of which psychologist's ideas encouraged the new morality of the 1920s?
 - a. Sigmund Freud
 - b. Alice Paul
 - c. W. E. B. Du Bois
 - d. Margaret Sanger
2. Which amendment did Alice Paul promote to end gender discrimination?
 - a. Prohibition Amendment
 - b. Equal Rights Amendment
 - c. Sheppard-Towner Amendment
 - d. Free Exercise Amendment
3. Which novel of the era satirized the conformity of the American middle class?
 - a. *This Side of Paradise*
 - b. *The Sun Also Rises*
 - c. *A Farewell to Arms*
 - d. *Babbitt*
4. Why did the prohibition amendment fail after its adoption in 1919?
5. What was the Harlem Renaissance, and who were some of the most famous participants?

Answer available at the end of this section.

GLOSSARY

bootlegging available at the end of this section.

expatriate available at the end of this section.

flapper available at the end of this section.

Lost Generation available at the end of this section.

Negro nationalism available at the end of this section.

new morality available at the end of this section.

Answers

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. a
2. b
3. d
4. The prohibition amendment failed due to its infeasibility. It lacked both public support and funds for its enforcement. It also lessened Americans' respect for law and order, and sparked a rise in unlawful activities, such as illegal alcohol production and organized crime.
5. The Harlem Renaissance was a rediscovery and celebration of black culture and race pride. Within this context, black literature and art flourished. Writers such as Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, and Zora Neale Hurston created fiction and poetry that spoke directly to the experiences of black Americans. Meanwhile, black scholars and political leaders, such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey, created new social and political ideologies and defined a distinct national identity for African Americans.

GLOSSARY

a nineteenth-century term for the illegal transport of alcoholic beverages that became popular during prohibition

GLOSSARY

someone who lives outside of their home country

GLOSSARY

a young, modern woman who embraced the new morality and fashions of the Jazz Age

GLOSSARY

a group of writers who came of age during World War I and expressed their disillusionment with the era

GLOSSARY

the notion that African Americans had a distinct and separate national heritage that should inspire pride and a sense of community

GLOSSARY

the more permissive mores adopted by many young people in the 1920s

1.2: The Slavery Controversy and Abolitionist Literature

Learning Objectives

After completing this section, you should be able to:

- Summarize the ways that Africans resisted slavery, the impact of that resistance, who was involved in anti-slavery movements, and the arguments they used to advance their cause
- Explain how slavery related to ideas of manifest destiny, the Western expansion, and the Mexican-American War
- Define the key abolitionist arguments of Garrison, Walker, and Mott, and distinguish their approaches from one another
- List the chief features of the slave narrative as a literary genre
- Distinguish similarities and differences between Douglass' and Jacobs' slave narratives, analyzing the roles gender and genre play in those distinctions
- Identify key turning points in Douglass' account of achieving freedom
- Outline the ways that Jacobs appealed specifically to women readers in the North
- Describe Stowe's appeal to her readers in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and formulate hypotheses to explain its incredible popularity despite stereotypical representations of women and African Americans
- Analyze the role of Christianity, motherhood, and racist representations in the antislavery arguments of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

Slavery and the Debate over Abolition

Resistance and Abolition

Consider these questions as you read: In what ways did Africans resist slavery, and what was the impact of this resistance? Who was involved in anti-slavery movements, and how did the sentiment spread? What arguments did anti-slavery movements use to advance their cause?

Resistance to slavery came in many forms, all of which contributed to the abolition of slavery as an institution in the Americas in the second half of the nineteenth century. There were two main arms of resistance: that of slaves themselves and that of abolitionists, whose calls for the end of slavery became louder and more forceful beginning in the last two decades of the eighteenth century.

Africans resisted slavery in several ways. First, they adopted defensive measures in their own villages to elude capture by slavers. Second, they launched attacks on the crews aboard slave ships. Slavers' reports document over 400 such attacks, but scholars believe there were many more. Third, once ashore, Africans ran away, sometimes establishing Maroon communities. Maroon communities, such as those in Suriname and Jamaica, and the Republic of Palmares in Brazil, warred with white settlers throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Fourth, African slaves revolted on the very lands on which they were enslaved. The first slave revolt in the Americas we know of occurred in 1522 on the island of Hispaniola. This revolt, like most that would follow in the next 250 years, was quickly put down. During the late eighteenth century, however, the Americas saw an increase in slave revolts, especially in the French Caribbean. The French and Haitian Revolutions, which began in 1789 and 1791 respectively, largely inspired these revolts. Both revolutions were fought in the name of natural rights and the equality of men, ideas not lost on those who remained enslaved in the French colonial world. The French revolutionary government even abolished slavery in its colonies, although this did not last for very long, as slavery was soon reinstated during the reign of Napoleon. Slave revolts continued into the nineteenth century in British and Spanish Caribbean colonies. A revolt on the British-controlled island of Barbados in 1816 involved 20,000 slaves from over seventy plantations.

In 1831, a slave revolt in Virginia led by Nat Turner, although small in comparison with other slave revolts of the same period, became a symbol for slaveholders in the U.S. of the danger posed by abolition. For others, however, two decades of increased slave unrest supported calls for the end of slavery. These were the individuals involved in anti-slavery movements, which began gaining substantial ground with public opinion beginning in the 1780s. The anti-slavery movement was perhaps strongest in Britain, where member of Parliament William Wilberforce led anti-slavery campaigns from the 1780s onwards. Evangelical Protestant Christians joined him. These campaigns led to thousands of petitions to end slavery between the 1780s and 1830s.

The slave trade was anti-slavery's first target and in 1787 the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade was established in Britain. Wilberforce and evangelical Protestants saw slavery and slaveholders as evil. So, too, did the Quakers (or the Society of Friends). On both sides of the Atlantic, Quakers attacked slavery as immoral and prohibited their members from owning slaves or being involved in any part of the slave trade.

In addition to these moral attacks on slavery, Enlightenment thinkers attacked slavery on philosophical grounds. French Enlightenment philosophers such as Montesquieu argued that slavery went against the natural rights of man. During the French Revolution, members of the Society of the Friends of Blacks, which originated among Enlightenment thinkers, joined with free blacks from the Caribbean colonies living in France, who organized the Society of Colored Citizens, to advocate for equal rights for free people of color and the end of slavery. The anti-slavery movement scored a victory in 1807 when the United States and then Britain signed bills to end their nations' involvement in the slave trade. Many in the anti-slavery movement believed this was the first step to abolishing slavery as an institution.

The Library of Congress: "Abolition, Anti-Slavery Movements, and the Rise of the Sectional Controversy"

To better understand abolition, antislavery movements, and the rise of the sectional controversy, read this text, which provides a short overview of abolition with related images from the Library of Congress.

Black and white abolitionists in the first half of the nineteenth century waged a biracial assault against slavery. Their efforts proved to be extremely effective. Abolitionists focused attention on slavery and made it difficult to ignore. They heightened the rift that had threatened to destroy the unity of the nation even as early as the Constitutional Convention.

Although some Quakers were slaveholders, members of that religious group were among the earliest to protest the African slave trade, the perpetual bondage of its captives, and the practice of separating enslaved family members by sale to different masters.

As the nineteenth century progressed, many abolitionists united to form numerous antislavery societies. These groups sent petitions with thousands of signatures to Congress, held abolition meetings and conferences, boycotted products made with slave labor, printed mountains of literature, and gave innumerable speeches for their cause. Individual abolitionists sometimes advocated violent means for bringing slavery to an end.

Although black and white abolitionists often worked together, by the 1840s they differed in philosophy and method. While many white abolitionists focused only on slavery, black Americans tended to couple anti-slavery activities with demands for racial equality and justice.

Anti-Slavery Activists

Christian Arguments Against Slavery

Benjamin Lay, a Quaker who saw slavery as a "notorious sin", addresses this 1737 volume to those who "pretend to lay claim to the pure and holy Christian religion". Although some Quakers held slaves, no religious group was more outspoken against slavery from the seventeenth century until slavery's demise. Quaker petitions on behalf of the emancipation of African Americans flowed into colonial legislatures and later to the United States Congress.

Figure 1.2.1: Benjamin Lay. *All Slave Keepers that Keep the Innocent in Bondage . . .* Philadelphia: Printed for the Author, 1737. Franklin Collection, [Rare Book and Special Collections Division](#). (3-22)

Plea for the Suppression of the Slave Trade

In this plea for the abolition of the slave trade, Anthony Benezet, a Quaker of French Huguenot descent, pointed out that if buyers did not demand slaves, the supply would end. "Without purchasers", he argued, "there would be no trade; and consequently every purchaser as he encourages the trade, becomes partaker in the guilt of it". He contended that guilt existed on both sides of the Atlantic. There are Africans, he alleged, "who will sell their own children, kindred, or neighbors". Benezet also used the biblical maxim, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you", to justify ending slavery. Insisting that emancipation alone would not solve the problems of people of color, Benezet opened schools to prepare them for more productive lives.

Figure 1.2.2: Anthony Benezet. *Observations on the Inslaving, Importing and Purchasing of Negroes*. Germantown, Pennsylvania: Christopher Sower, 1760. American Imprints Collection, [Rare Book and Special Collections Division](#). (3-1)

The Conflict Between Christianity and Slavery

Connecticut theologian Jonathan Edwards, born 1745, echoes Benezet's use of the Golden Rule as well as the natural rights arguments of the Revolutionary era to justify the abolition of slavery. In this printed version of his 1791 sermon to a local anti-slavery group, he notes the progress toward abolition in the North and predicts that through vigilant efforts slavery would be extinguished in the next fifty years.

Figure 1.2.3: Jonathan Edwards, D.D. *The Injustice and Impolicy of the Slave Trade and of the Slavery of Africans . . . A Sermon*. New Haven, Connecticut: Thomas and Samuel Green, 1791. [Rare Book and Special Collections Division](#). (3-2)

Sojourner Truth

Abolitionist and women's rights advocate Sojourner Truth was enslaved in New York until she was an adult. Born Isabella Baumfree around the turn of the nineteenth century, her first language was Dutch. Owned by a series of masters, she was freed in 1827 by the New York Gradual Abolition Act and worked as a domestic. In 1843 she believed that she was called by God to travel around the nation--sojourn--and preach the truth of his word. Thus, she believed God gave her the name, Sojourner Truth. One of the ways that she supported her work was selling these calling cards.

Figure 1.2.4: Sojourner Truth. Portrait. Carte de visite, 1864. Gladstone Collection, [Prints and Photographs Division](#). Reproduction Number: LC-USZC4-6166 (3-11a)

Figure 1.2.5: Sojourner Truth. Carte de visite (seated), 1864. Gladstone Collection, [Prints and Photographs Division](#). Reproduction Number: LC-USZC4-6165 (3-11b) **Woman to Woman**

Figure 1.2.6: *The Negro Woman's Appeal to Her White Sisters*. [London]: Richard Barrett, [1850]. Broadside. Printed Ephemera Collection, [Rare Book and Special Collections Division](#). (3-12)

Ye wives and ye mothers, your influence extend--
Ye sisters, ye daughters, the helpless defend--
The strong ties are severed for one crime alone,
Possessing a colour less fair than your own.

Abolitionists understood the power of pictorial representations in drawing support for the cause of emancipation. As white and black women became more active in the 1830s as lecturers, petitioners, and meeting organizers, variations of this female supplicant motif, appealing for interracial sisterhood, appeared in newspapers, broadsides, and handicraft goods sold at fund-raising fairs.

Harriet Tubman--the Moses of Her People

The quote below, echoing Patrick Henry, is from this biography of underground railroad conductor Harriet Tubman:

Harriet was now left alone, . . . She turned her face toward the north, and fixing her eyes on the guiding star, and committing her way unto the Lord, she started again upon her long, lonely journey. She believed that there were one or two things she had a right to, liberty or death.

After making her own escape, Tubman returned to the South nineteen times to bring over three hundred fugitives to safety, including her own aged parents.

In a handwritten note on the title page of this book, Susan B. Anthony, who was an abolitionist as well as a suffragist, referred to Tubman as a "most wonderful woman".

Figure 1.2.7: Sarah H. Bradford. *Harriet, the Moses of Her People*. New York: J. J. Little & Co., 1901. Susan B. Anthony Collection, [Rare Book and Special Collections Division](#). (3-21)

Increasing Tide of Anti-slavery Organizations

In 1833, sixty abolitionist leaders from ten states met in Philadelphia to create a national organization to bring about immediate emancipation of all slaves. The American Anti-slavery Society elected officers and adopted a constitution and declaration. Drafted by William Lloyd Garrison, the declaration pledged its members to work for emancipation through non-violent actions of "moral suasion", or "the overthrow of prejudice by the power of love". The society encouraged public lectures, publications, civil disobedience, and the boycott of cotton and other slave-manufactured products.

Figure 1.2.8: Declaration of the Anti-Slavery Convention. Philadelphia, December 4, 1833. Broadside. [Rare Book and Special Collections Division](#). (3-3)

William Lloyd Garrison--Abolitionist Strategies

White abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, born in 1805, had a particular fondness for poetry, which he believed to be "naturally and instinctively on the side of liberty". He used verse as a vehicle for enhancing anti-slavery sentiment. Garrison collected his work in *Sonnets and Other Poems* (1843).

Figure 1.2.9: William L. Garrison. "Sonnet to Liberty" Manuscript, December 14, 1840. [Manuscript Division](#). (3-19a)

During the 1840s, abolitionist societies used song to stir up enthusiasm at their meetings. To make songs easier to learn, new words were set to familiar tunes. This song by William Lloyd Garrison has six stanzas set to the tune of "Auld Lang Syne".

Figure 1.2.10: William L. Garrison. "Song of the Abolitionist" November 10, 1841. [Manuscript Division](#). (3-19b)

Popularizing Anti-Slavery Sentiment

Slave Stealer Branded

Massachusetts sea captain Jonathan Walker, born in 1790, was apprehended off the coast of Florida for attempting to carry slaves who were members of his church denomination to freedom in the Bahamas in 1844. He was jailed for more than a year and branded with the letters "S.S." for slave stealer. The abolitionist poet John Greenleaf Whittier immortalized Walker's deed in this often reprinted verse: "Then lift that manly right hand, bold ploughman of the wave! Its branded palm shall prophesy, 'Salvation to the Slave!'"

Figure 1.2.11: John G. Whittier. "The Branded Hand" Philadelphia, ca. 1845. Leaflet. [Rare Book and Special Collections Division](#). (3-15)

Abolitionist Songsters

George W. Clark's, *The Liberty Minstrel*, is an exception among songsters in having music as well as words. "Minstrel" in the title has its earlier meaning of "wandering singer". Clark, a white musician, wrote some of the music himself; most of it, however, consists of well-known melodies to which anti-slavery words have been written. The book is open to a page containing lyrics to the tune of "Near the Lake", which appeared earlier in this exhibit (section 1, item 22) as "Long Time Ago". Note that there is an anti-slavery poem on the right-hand page. Like many songsters, *The Liberty Minstrel* contains an occasional poem.

Figure 1.2.12: George W. Clark. *The Liberty Minstrel*. New York: Leavitt & Alden [et al.], 1844. [Music Division](#). (3-17)

Abolitionist Songsters

Music was one of the most powerful weapons of the abolitionists. In 1848, William Wells Brown, abolitionist and former slave, published *The Anti-Slavery Harp*, "a collection of songs for anti-slavery meetings", which contains songs and occasional poems. The *Anti-Slavery Harp* is in the format of a "songster"--giving the lyrics and indicating the tunes to which they are to be sung, but with no music. The book is open to the pages containing lyrics to the tune of the "Marseillaise", the French national anthem, which to 19th-century Americans symbolized the determination to bring about freedom, by force if necessary.

Figure 1.2.13: *The Anti-Slavery Harp: A Collection of Songs for Anti-slavery Meetings*. Compiled by William Wells Brown. Boston: Bela Marsh, 1848. [Music Division](#). (3-16)

Suffer the Children

This abolitionist tract, distributed by the Sunday School Union, uses actual life stories about slave children separated from their parents or mistreated by their masters to excite the sympathy of free children. Vivid illustrations help to reinforce the message that black children should have the same rights as white children, and that holding humans as property is "a sin against God".

Figure 1.2.14: *The Child's Anti-Slavery Book: Containing a Few Words about American Slave Children*. . . . New York: Carlton and Porter, 1859. [Rare Book and Special Collections Division](#). (3-13)

Fugitive Slave Law

North to Canada

In the wake of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, which forced Northern law enforcement officers to aid in the recapture of runaways, more than ten thousand fugitive slaves swelled the flood of those fleeing to Canada. The Colonial Church and School Society established mission schools in western Canada, particularly for children of fugitive slaves but open to all. The school's Mistress Williams notes that their success proves the "feasibility of educating together white and colored children". While primarily focusing on spiritual and secular educational operations, the report reproduces letters of thanks for food, clothing, shoes, and books sent from England. This early photograph accompanied one such letter to the children of St. Matthew's School, Bristol.

Figure 1.2.15: *Mission to Fugitive Slaves in Canada: Being a Branch of the Operations of the Colonial Church and School Society*. . . . 1858-9. [London]: Society's Offices, 1859. Pamphlet. [Rare Book and Special Collections Division](#). (3-4a)

Figure 1.2.16: *Mission to Fugitive Slaves in Canada: Being a Branch of the Operations of the Colonial Church and School Society*. . . . 1858-9. [London]: Society's Offices, 1859. Copyprint. [Rare Book and Special Collections Division](#). (3-4b)

The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850

This controversial law allowed slave-hunters to seize alleged fugitive slaves without due process of law and prohibited anyone from aiding escaped fugitives or obstructing their recovery. Because it was often presumed that a black person was a slave, the law threatened the safety of all blacks, slave and free, and forced many Northerners to become more defiant in their support of fugitives. S. M. Africanus presents objections in prose and verse to justify noncompliance with this law.

Figure 1.2.17: S. M. Africanus. *The Fugitive Slave Law*. Hartford, Connecticut, 1850. [Rare Book and Special Collections Division](#). (3-5)

Anthony Burns--Capture of A Fugitive Slave

This is a portrait of fugitive slave Anthony Burns, whose arrest and trial in Boston under the provisions of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 incited riots and protests by white and black abolitionists and citizens of Boston in the spring of 1854. The portrait is surrounded by scenes from his life, including his sale on the auction block, escape from Richmond, Virginia, capture and imprisonment in Boston, and his return to a vessel to transport him to the South. Within a year after his capture, abolitionists were able to raise enough money to purchase Burns's freedom.

Figure 1.2.18: *Anthony Burns*. Boston: R. M. Edwards, 1855. Wood engraving with letterpress. [Prints and Photographs Division](#).
Reproduction Number: LC-USZ62-90750 (3-9)

Growing Sectionalism

Antebellum Map Showing the Free and Slave States

The growing sectionalism that was dividing the nation during the late antebellum years is documented graphically with this political map of the United States, published in 1856. Designed to portray and compare the areas of free and slave states,

it also includes tables of statistics for each of the states from the 1850 census, the results of the 1852 presidential election, congressional representation by state, and the number of slaves held by owners. The map is also embellished with portraits of John C. Fremont and William L. Dayton, the 1856 presidential and vice-presidential candidates of the newly organized Republican Party, which advocated an anti-slavery platform.

Figure 1.2.19: William Reynolds. *Reynolds's Political Map of the United States . . .* New York: Wm. C. Reynolds, 1856. [Geography and Map Division](#). (3-20)

Distribution of Slaves

Although the Southern states were known collectively as the "slave states" by the end of the Antebellum Period, this map provides statistical evidence to demonstrate that slaves were not evenly distributed throughout each state or the region as a whole. Using data from the 1860 census, the map shows, by county, the percentage of slave population to the whole population. Tables also list population and area for both Southern and Northern states, while an inset map shows the extent of cotton, rice, and sugar cultivation. Another version of this map was published with Daniel Lord's *The Effect of Secession upon the Commercial Relations between the North and South, and upon Each Section* (New York, 1861), a series of articles reprinted from The New York Times.

Figure 1.2.20: Adolph von Steinwehr. *Map Showing the Distribution of Slaves in the Southern States*, [n. p., n. d.]. Printed Map. [Geography and Map Division](#). (3-14)

Militant Abolition

John Brown's Raid

More than twenty years after the militant abolitionist John Brown had consecrated his life to the destruction of slavery, his crusade ended in October 1859 with his ill-fated attempt to seize the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry in western Virginia. He hoped to take the weapons from the arsenal and arm the slaves, who would then overthrow their masters and establish a free state for themselves.

Convicted of treason and sentenced to death, Brown maintained to the end that he intended only to free the slaves, not to incite insurrection. His zeal, courage, and willingness to die for the slaves made him a martyr and a bellwether of the violence soon to consume the country during the Civil War.

Figure 1.2.21: John Brown. *Address of John Brown . . . Sentence of Death; For his heroic attempt at Harpers Ferry. . .* Boston: C.C. Mead. Broadside. [Rare Book and Special Collections Division](#). (3-6)

Frederick Douglass on John Brown

The friendship of Frederick Douglass and John Brown began in 1848, when Douglass visited Brown's home in Springfield, Massachusetts. Brown confided to Douglass his ambitious scheme to free the slaves. Over the next eleven years, Brown sought Douglass's counsel and support.

Figure 1.2.22: Frederick Douglass. "A Lecture on John Brown" Typescript, 1860. Frederick Douglass Papers, [Manuscript Division](#). (3-8a)

Figure 1.2.23: Frederick Douglass. "A Lecture on John Brown" Autograph corrections and drafts, 1860. Frederick Douglass Papers, [Manuscript Division](#). (3-8b)

In August 1859 Brown made a final plea to Douglass to join the raid on Harpers Ferry. Douglass refused. After Brown's capture, federal marshals issued a warrant for Douglass's arrest as an accomplice. Douglass fled abroad. When he returned five months later to mourn the death of his youngest daughter Annie, he had been exonerated. Douglass wrote this lecture as a tribute to "a hero and martyr in the cause of liberty".

"The Book That Made This Great War"

Harriet Beecher Stowe's Mighty Pen

Harriet Beecher Stowe is best remembered as the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, her first novel, published as a serial in 1851 and then in book form in 1852. This book infuriated Southerners. It focused on the cruelties of slavery--particularly the separation of family members--and brought instant acclaim to Stowe. After its publication, Stowe traveled throughout the United States and Europe speaking against slavery. She reported that upon meeting President Lincoln, he remarked, "So you're the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war".

Figure 1.2.24: *Harriet Beecher Stowe*. Copyprint. Published by Johnson, Fry & Co., 1872, after Alonzo Chappel. [Prints and Photographs Division](#).
Reproduction Number: LC-USZ62-10476 (3-18)

Uncle Tom's Cabin--Theatrical Productions

This poster for a production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* features the Garden City Quartette under the direction of Tom Dailey and George W. Goodhart. Many stage productions of Harriet Beecher Stowe's famous novel have been performed in various parts of the country since *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was first published as a serial in 1851. Although the major actors were usually white, people of color were sometimes part of the cast. African American performers were often allowed only stereotypical roles--if any--in productions by major companies.

Figure 1.2.25: *Palmer's Uncle Tom's Cabin Co.*, 1882, no. 11 Buffalo, N.Y.: Courier Litho. Co., ca. 1899. [Prints and Photographs Division](#).
Reproduction Number: LC-USZC4-6171 (3-10)

2: CHAPTER 2

2.1: The Church in the Southern Black Community

2.2: Explore The Dispersal of Enslaved Africans Across the Atlantic World

2.1: The Church in the Southern Black Community

The collection of documents brought together in this project begins to tell the story of the growth of Protestant religion among African Americans during the nineteenth century, and of the birth of what came to be known as the "Black Church" in the United States. This development continues to have enormous political, spiritual, and economic consequences. But perhaps what is most apparent in these texts is the diversity of ways in which that religious tradition was envisioned, experienced, and implemented. From the white Baptist and Methodist missionaries sent to convert enslaved Africans, to the earliest pioneers of the independent black denominations, to black missionaries in Africa, to the eloquent rhetoric of W.E.B. DuBois, the story of the black church is a tale of variety and struggle in the midst of constant racism and oppression. It is also a story of constant change, and of the coincidence of cultural cohesion among enslaved Africans and the introduction of Protestant evangelicalism to their communities.

The Church During Slavery

For our purposes, the account begins in the decades after the American Revolution, as Northern states gradually began to abolish slavery. As a result, sharper differences emerged between the experiences of enslaved peoples in the South and those Northerners who were now relatively free. By 1810 the slave trade to the United States had come to an end and the slave population began to increase naturally, giving rise to an increasingly large native-born population of African Americans. With fewer migrants who had experienced Africa personally, these transformations allowed the myriad cultures and language groups of enslaved Africans to blend together, making way for the preservation and transmission of religious practices that were increasingly "African-American."

This transition coincided with the period of intense religious revivalism known as "awakenings." In the Southern states beginning in the 1770s, increasing numbers of slaves converted to evangelical religions such as the Methodist and Baptist faiths. Many clergy within these denominations actively promoted the idea that all Christians were equal in the sight of God, a message that provided hope and sustenance to the slaves. They also encouraged worship in ways that many Africans found to be similar, or at least adaptable, to African worship patterns, with enthusiastic singing, clapping, dancing, and even spirit-possession. Still, many white owners and clergy preached a message of strict obedience, and insisted on slave attendance at white-controlled churches, since they were fearful that if slaves were allowed to worship independently they would ultimately plot rebellion against their owners. It is clear that many blacks saw these white churches, in which ministers promoted obedience to one's master as the highest religious ideal, as a mockery of the "true" Christian message of equality and liberation as they knew it.

In the slave quarters, however, African Americans organized their own "invisible institution." Through signals, passwords, and messages not discernible to whites, they called believers to "hush harbors" where they freely mixed African rhythms, singing, and beliefs with evangelical Christianity. We have little remaining written record of these religious gatherings. But it was here that the spirituals, with their double meanings of religious salvation and freedom from slavery, developed and flourished; and here, too, that black preachers, those who believed that God had called them to speak his Word, polished their "chanted sermons," or rhythmic, intoned style of extemporaneous preaching. Part church, part psychological refuge, and part organizing point for occasional acts of outright rebellion (Nat Turner, whose armed insurrection in Virginia in 1831 resulted in the deaths of scores of white men, women, and children, was a self-styled Baptist preacher), these meetings provided one of the few ways for enslaved African Americans to express and enact their hopes for a better future.

Emancipation

Emancipation from slavery in 1863 posed distinctive religious challenges for African Americans in the South. When the Civil War finally brought freedom to previously enslaved peoples, the task of organizing religious communities was only one element of the larger need to create new lives--to reunite families, to find jobs, and to figure out what it would mean to live in the United States as citizens rather than property. Northern blacks, having already gained freedom, wanted to bring their nascent black churches to their freed Southern brethren. Yet they saw Emancipation as an enormous logistical challenge: how could black Protestants meet the many needs of newly freed slaves and truly welcome them into a Christian community? For both Southern and Northern blacks, Emancipation promised a meeting between two African-American religious traditions that had moved far apart, in terms of both theology and ritual, in the previous seventy years. In significant respects, the story of African-American religion between Emancipation and the Northern migration that began just prior to World War I is a tale of regionally distinctive communities that found several areas of common cause, not the least of which were the advent of Jim Crow and lynching as ominous new forms of racism.

A long history of antislavery and political activity among Northern black Protestants had convinced them that they could play a major role in the adjustment of the four million freed slaves to American life. In a massive missionary effort, Northern black leaders such as Daniel A. Payne and Theophilus Gould Steward established missions to their Southern counterparts, resulting in the dynamic growth of independent black churches in the Southern states between 1865 and 1900. Predominantly white denominations, such as the Presbyterian, Congregational, and Episcopal churches, also sponsored missions, opened schools for freed slaves, and aided the general welfare of Southern blacks, but the majority of African-Americans chose to join the independent black denominations founded in the Northern states during the antebellum era. Within a decade the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) churches claimed Southern membership in the hundreds of thousands, far outstripping that of any other organizations. They were quickly joined in 1870 by a new Southern-based denomination, the Colored (now "Christian") Methodist Episcopal Church, founded by indigenous Southern black leaders. Finally, in 1894 black Baptists formed the National Baptist Convention, an organization that is currently the largest black religious organization in the United States.

Growth and Development of the Church

In many ways, this missionary effort was enormously successful. It helped finance and build new churches and schools, it facilitated a remarkable increase in Southern black literacy (from 5% in 1870 to approximately 70% by 1900), and, as had been the case in the North, it promoted the rise of many African American leaders who worked well outside the sphere of the church in politics, education, and other professions. But it also created tensions between Northerners, who saw themselves in many respects as the superiors and mentors of their less fortunate Southern brethren, and Southerners, who had their own ideas about how to worship, work, and live. Not all ex-slaves welcomed the "help" of the Northerners, black or white, particularly because most Northern blacks (like whites) saw Southern black worship as hopelessly "heathen." Missionaries like Daniel Payne, an AME bishop, took it as their task to educate Southern blacks about what "true" Christianity looked like; they wanted to convince ex-slaves to give up any remnants of African practices (such as drumming, dancing, or moaning) and embrace a more sedate, intellectual style of religion. Educational differences played a role in this tension as well: Southern blacks, most of whom had been forbidden from learning to read, saw religion as a matter of oral tradition and immediate experience and emotion; Northerners, however, stressed that one could not truly be Christian unless one was able to read the Bible and understand the creeds and written literature that accompanied a more textually-oriented religious system.

Freedom also brought with it opportunities for self-improvement and "getting ahead," and differences of class and location also fostered different kinds of religious practices and beliefs. Gradually, Southern religious life became as variegated as that in the North, with Protestant churches to suit a variety of styles. Generally, poorer and more rural churches tended to cling more tenaciously to older customs, and to more experiential forms of worship, and since the vast majority of Southern blacks remained in rural areas, many of the traditions inherited from the "hush harbors" of slavery—including root work, chanted preaching, and particularly musical styles—remained a part of church life. In Southern cities, as the numbers of educated and middle-class African Americans grew, so too did the interest in a more codified and uniform religious experience like that of the North.

Meanwhile, African American religion in urban areas of the South also changed dramatically, particularly after the 1880s. Here, issues of class predominated, as middle-class blacks began to build a religious life much like that of their white counterparts: the AME Church, in particular, was noted for its large, formal churches, its educational network of schools and colleges, and its vast publishing arm that included several publications by the end of the century. Black religious leaders became involved in some of the interdenominational institutions, such as the YMCA and the Sunday School movement, that were the bulwarks of evangelical life at the turn of the twentieth century. Yet unlike white evangelical leaders of the day, who were also engaged in theological battles about biblical history and interpretation, middle-class blacks kept their eyes trained toward the basic social injustices wrought by American racism. This battle, which had steadily worsened after the 1870s, promoted a degree of political unity among black Protestant groups that, at times, outweighed their many differences.

Women in the Church

Yet there were some internal tensions. With the emergence of middle-class membership came issues about women's participation in the church, as some black women now had the relative leisure to look beyond the immediacies of life. Several female leaders in this era raised the issue of women's ordination, only to be rebuffed by the male hierarchy. Instead, women formed missionary societies to address all manner of local and international needs, from the support of job training in their communities to funding for African American missionaries to Africa. They worked on urban ills, established reading groups, and advocated for better living conditions. They also wrote for religious periodicals, promoting quite traditional ideals of Victorian womanhood, respectability, and racial uplift. Women also continued work among their less fortunate counterparts in the rural South, in what continued to be an uneasy alliance. Like male religious leaders, too, they protested the creeping effects of Jim Crow laws and the systematic

violence of lynching.

Most significant for us today, these African American church leaders recognized the importance of what they were doing for future generations of Americans. They wrote histories, biographies, memoirs, and other accounts of religious life in the South during this era. It is through these written texts that we still have access to the many voices that comprise the first century of the black church in the United States.

2.2: Explore The Dispersal of Enslaved Africans Across the Atlantic World

The SlaveVoyages website is a collaborative digital initiative that compiles and makes publicly accessible records of the largest slave trades in history. Search these records to learn about the broad origins and forced relocations of more than 12 million African people who were sent across the Atlantic in slave ships, and hundreds of thousands more who were trafficked within the Americas. Explore where they were taken, the numerous rebellions that occurred, the horrific loss of life during the voyages, the identities and nationalities of the perpetrators, and much more.

Vist the SlaveVoyages website here: <https://www.slavevoyages.org/>

3: CHAPTER 3

3.1: What is Literary Criticism?

3.2: Literary Terms - A Guide

3.3: A Short History of the Early American Novel

3.1: What is Literary Criticism?

By reading and discussing literature, we expand our imagination, our sense of what is possible, and our ability to empathize with others. Improve your ability to read critically and interpret texts while gaining appreciation for different literary genres and theories of interpretation. Read samples of literary interpretation. Write a critique of a literary work.

Texts that interpret literary works are usually persuasive texts. Literary critics may conduct a close reading of a literary work, critique a literary work from the stance of a particular literary theory, or debate the soundness of other critics' interpretations. The work of literary critics is similar to the work of authors writing evaluative texts. For example, the skills required to critique films, interpret laws, or evaluate artistic trends are similar to those skills required by literary critics.

A YouTube element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here: <http://pb.libretexts.org/al/?p=42>

Why Write Literary Criticism?

People have been telling stories and sharing responses to stories since the beginning of time. By reading and discussing literature, we expand our imagination, our sense of what is possible, and our ability to empathize with others. Reading and discussing literature can enhance our ability to write. It can sharpen our critical faculties, enabling us to assess works and better understand why literature can have such a powerful effect on our lives.

"Literary texts" include works of fiction and poetry. In school, English instructors ask students to critique literary texts, or works. Literary criticism refers to a genre of writing whereby an author critiques a literary text, either a work of fiction, a play, or poetry. Alternatively, some works of literary criticism address how a particular theory of interpretation informs a reading of a work or refutes some other critics' reading of a work.

Diverse Rhetorical Situations

The genre of literary interpretation is more specialized than most of the other genres addressed in this section, as suggested by the table below. People may discuss their reactions to literary works informally (at coffee houses, book clubs, or the gym) but the lion's share of literary criticism takes place more formally: in college classrooms, professional journals, academic magazines, and Web sites.

Students interpret literary works for English instructors or for students enrolled in English classes. In their interpretations, students may argue for a particular interpretation or they may dispute other critics' interpretations. Alternatively, students may read a text with a particular literary theory in mind, using the theory to explicate a particular point of view. For example, writers could critique *The Story of an Hour* by Kate Chopin from a feminist theoretical perspective. Thanks to the Internet, some English classes are now publishing students' interpretations on Web sites. In turn, some students and English faculty publish their work in academic literary criticism journals.

Over the years, literary critics have argued about the best ways to interpret literature. Accordingly, many "schools" or "theories of criticism" have emerged. As you can imagine—given that they were developed by sophisticated specialists—some of these theoretical approaches are quite sophisticated and abstract.

Below is a summary of some of the more popular literary theories. Because it is a summary, the following tends to oversimplify the theories. In any case, unless you are enrolled in a literary criticism course, you won't need to learn the particulars of all of these approaches. Instead, your teacher may ask you to take an eclectic approach, pulling interpretative questions from multiple literary theories.

Note: If you are interested in learning more about these theories, review either [Skylar Hamilton Burris' Literary Criticism: An Overview of Approaches](#) or [Dino F. Felluga's Undergraduate Guide to Critical Theory](#)

- [Schools of Literary Criticism](#)
- [New Criticism](#): Focuses on "objectively" evaluating the text, identifying its underlying form. May study, for example, a text's use of imagery, metaphor, or symbolism. Isn't concerned with matters outside the text, such as biographical or contextual information. Online Examples: [A Formalist Reading of Sandra Cisneros's "Woman Hollering Creek"](#) , [Sound in William](#)

Shakespeare's *The Tempest* by Skylar Hamilton Burris

- **Reader-Response:** Criticism Focuses on each reader's personal reactions to a text, assuming meaning is created by a reader's or interpretive community's personal interaction with a text. Assumes no single, correct, universal meaning exists because meaning resides in the minds of readers. Online Examples: [Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz": A Reader's Response \(PDF\)](#)
- **Feminism:** Criticism Focuses on understanding ways gender roles are reflected or contradicted by texts, how dominance and submission play out in texts, and how gender roles evolve in texts. Online Example: ["The Yellow Wall-Paper": A Twist on Conventional Symbols, Subverting the French Androcentric Influence by Jane Le Marquand](#)
- **New Historicism** Focuses on understanding texts by viewing texts in the context of other texts. Seeks to understand economic, social, and political influences on texts. Tend to broadly define the term "text," so, for example, the Catholic Church could be defined as a "text." May adopt the perspectives of other interpretive communities—particularly reader-response criticism, feminist criticism, and Marxist approaches—to interpret texts. Online Example [Monstrous Acts by Jonathan Lethem](#)
- **Media Criticism** Focuses on writers' use of multimedia and hypertexts. Online Examples [The Electronic Labyrinth by Christopher Keep, Tim McLaughlin, and Robin Parmar](#)
- **Psychoanalytical Criticism** Focuses on psychological dimensions of the work. Online Examples: [A Freudian Approach to Erin McGraw's "A Thief" by Skylar Hamilton Burris](#)
- **Marxist Criticism** Focuses on ways texts reflect, reinforce, or challenge the effects of class, power relations, and social roles. Online Example: [A Reading of Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" by Peter Kosenko](#)
- **Archetypal Criticism** Focuses on identifying the underlying myths in stories and archetypes, which reflect what the psychologist Carl Jung called the "collective unconsciousness." Online Example: [A Catalogue of Symbols in The Awakening by Kate Chopin by Skylar Hamilton Burris](#)
- **Postcolonial Criticism** Focuses on how Western culture's (mis)representation of third-world countries and peoples in stories, myths, and stereotypical images encourages repression and domination. Online Example: [Other Voices](#)
- **Structuralism/Semiotics** Focuses on literature as a system of signs where meaning is constructed in a context, where words are inscribed with meaning by being compared to other words and structures. Online Example: [Applied Semiotics \[Online journal with many samples\]](#)
- **Post-Structuralism/Deconstruction** Focuses, along with Structuralism, on viewing literature as a system of signs, yet rejects the Structuralist view that a critic can identify the inherent meaning of a text, suggesting, instead that literature has no center, no single interpretation, that literary language is inherently ambiguous

Powerful works of literature invoke multiple readings. In other words, we can all read the same story or poem (or watch the same movie or listen to the same song) and come up with different, even conflicting, interpretations about what the work means. Who we are reflects how we read texts. Our experiences inspire us to relate to and sympathize with characters and difficult situations. Have we read similar stories? Have we actually faced some of the same challenges the characters in the story face?

In addition, literary theories have unique ways to develop and substantiate arguments. Some theories draw extensively on the work of other critics, while others concentrate on the reader's thoughts and feelings. Some theories analyze a work from an historical perspective, while others focus solely on a close reading of a text.

Accordingly, as with other genres, the following key features need to be read as points of departure as opposed to a comprehensive blueprint:

Focus

Examine a subject from a rhetorical perspective. Identify the intended audience, purpose, context, media, voice, tone, and persona. Distinguish between summarizing the literary work and presenting your argument. Many students fall into the trap of spending too much time summarizing the literature being analyzed as opposed to critiquing it. As a result, it would be wise to check with your teacher regarding how much plot summary is expected. As you approach this project, remember to keep your eye on the ball: What, exactly (in one sentence) is the gist of your interpretation?

Development

You can develop your ideas by researching the work of other literary critics. How do other critics evaluate an author's work? What literary theories do literary critics use to interpret texts or particular moments in history? Reading sample proposals can help you find and adopt an appropriate voice and persona. By reading samples, you can learn how others have prioritized particular criteria.

Below are some of the questions invoked by popular literary theories. Consider these questions as you read a work, perhaps

taking notes on your thoughts as you reread. You may focus on using one theory to “read and interpret” text or, more commonly, you may compare the critical concerns of different theories.

New Criticism/Formalism

- Character: How does the character evolve during the story? What is unique or interesting about a character? Is the character a stereotypical action hero, a patriarchal father figure, or Madonna? How does a character interact with other characters?
- Setting: How does the setting enhance tension within the work? Do any elements in the setting foreshadow the conclusion of the piece?
- Plot: What is the conflict? How do scenes lead to a suspenseful resolution? What scenes make the plot unusual, unexpected, suspenseful?
- Point of View: Who is telling the story? Is the narrator omniscient (all-knowing) or does the narrator have limited understanding?

Reader-Response Criticism

How does the text make you feel? What memories or experiences come to mind when you read? If you were the central protagonist, would you have behaved differently? Why? What values or ethics do you believe are suggested by the story? As your reading of a text progresses, what surprises you, inspires you?

Feminist Criticism

How does the story re-inscribe or contradict traditional gender roles? For example, are the male characters in “power positions” while the women are “dominated”? Are the men prone to action, decisiveness, and leadership while the female characters are passive, subordinate? Do gender roles create tension within the story? Do characters’ gender roles evolve over the course of the narrative?

New Historicism Criticism

How does the story reflect the aspirations and conditions of the lower classes or upper classes? Is tension created by juxtaposing privileged, powerful positions to subordinated, dominated positions? What information about the historical context of the story helps explain the character’s motivations? Who benefits from the outcome of the story or from a given character’s motivation?

Media Criticism

How does the medium alter readers’ interactions with the text? Has the reader employed multimedia or hypertext? What traditions from print and page design have shaped the structure of the text? In what ways has the author deviated from traditional, deductively organized linear texts?

Cite from the Work

Literary criticism involves close reading of a literary work, regardless of whether you are arguing about a particular interpretation, comparing stories or poems, or using a theory to interpret literature. Do not summarize the story. The purpose of the document is not to inform the readers, but to argue a particular interpretation. You only need to cite parts of the work that support or relate to your argument and follow the citation format required by your instructor (see Using and Citing Sources).

Below is an example from Sample Essays for English 103: Introduction to Fiction, Professor Matthew Hurt. Note how the writer uses block quotes to highlight key elements and paraphrase and summarizes the original works, using quotation marks where necessary.

...Twain offers a long descriptive passage of Huck and Jim’s life on the raft that seems, at first glance, to celebrate the idyllic freedom symbolized by the river and nature. . . A close reading of this passage, however, shows that the river is not a privileged natural space outside of and uncontaminated by society, but is inextricably linked to the social world on the shore, which itself

has positive value for Huck. Instead of seeking to escape society, Huck wants to escape the dull routines of life.

The passage abounds with lyrical descriptions of the river's natural beauty. For example, Huck's long description of the sunrise over the river captures the peaceful stillness and the visual beauty of the scene:

The first thing to see, looking away over the water, was a kind of dull line — that was the woods on t'other side — you couldn't make nothing else out; then a pale place in the sky; then more paleness, spreading around; then the river softened up, away off, and warn't black any more, but gray; . . . sometimes you could hear a sweep screaming; or jumbled up voices, it was so still, and sounds come so far; and by-and-by you could see a streak on the water which you know by the look of the streak that there's a snag there in the swift current which breaks on it and makes the streak look that way; and you see the mist curl up off of the water, and the east reddens up, and the river, and you make out a log cabin in the edge of the woods, away on the bank on t'other side of the river, . . . then the nice breeze springs up, and comes fanning you from over there, so cool and fresh, and sweet to smell, on account of the woods and the flowers; . . . and next you've got the full day, and everything smiling in the sun, and the song-birds just going at it! (129-130)

Here Huck celebrates the beauty of the natural world coming to life at the beginning of a new day. The “paleness” gradually spreading across the sky makes new objects visible which he describes in loving detail for the reader. The “nice breeze” is “cool and fresh” and “sweet to smell,” and the world seems to be “smiling in the sun” as the song-birds welcome the new day.

However, Huck includes a number of details within this passage that would seem to work against the language of natural beauty. After describing the gradually brightening sky, Huck notes that “you could see little dark spots drifting along, ever so far away — trading scows, and such things; and long black streaks — rafts.” The sun rise reveals not only natural objects (the brightening sky, the “snag,” the “mist”), but also brings into view man-made objects (“trading scows” and “rafts”) that signify human society's presence in this natural environment. Similarly, Huck speculates that the picturesque “log cabin” on the distant shore is a “woodyard, likely, and piled by them cheats so you can throw a dog through it anywheres.” Here the marker of human society takes on a sinister tone of corruption as Huck describes how unscrupulous wood sellers stack wood loosely to cheat their customers. Finally, although the breeze is “sweet to smell,” Huck assures the reader that this isn't always the case: “but sometimes not that way, because they've left dead fish laying around, gars, and such, and they do get pretty rank.”

These signs of society's presence on the river are largely negative. The woodyard is “piled by cheats” and the stacked fish pollute the “sweet” smell of the breeze. At this point, the opposition between “good nature” and “bad society” remains intact. The signs of human presence suggest a corruption of nature's beauty. In the paragraphs that follow, however, this opposition is subtly reversed. After Huck's account of the sunrise over the river, he describes how he and Jim watch the steamboats “coughing along up stream.” But when there are no steamboats or rafts to watch, he describes the scene as “solid lonesomeness” (130). No songbirds, no sweet breezes. Without human activities to watch, the scene suddenly becomes empty and “lonesome,” and nothing captures Huck's attention until more rafts and boats pass by and he can watch them chopping wood or listen to them beating pans in the fog.

Cite Other Critics' Interpretations of the Work

Criticism written by advanced English majors, graduate students, and literary critics may be more about what other critics have said than about the actual text. Indeed, many critics spend more time reading criticism and arguing about critical approaches than actually reading original works. However, unless you are enrolled in a literary theory course, your instructor probably wants you to focus more on interpreting the work than discussing other critical interpretations. This does not mean, however, that you should write about a literary work “blindly.” Instead, you are wise to find out what other students and critics have said about the work.

Below is a sample passage that illustrates how other critics' works can inspire an author and guide him or her in constructing a counter-argument, support an author's interpretation, and provide helpful biographical information.

In her critical biography of Shirley Jackson, Lenemaja Friedman notes that when Shirley Jackson's story “The Lottery” was published in the June 28, 1948 issue of the *New Yorker* it received a response that “no New Yorker story had ever received”: hundreds of letters poured in that were characterized by “bewilderment, speculation, and old-fashioned abuse.”¹ It is not hard to account for this response: Jackson's story portrays an “average” New England village with “average” citizens engaged in a deadly rite, the annual selection of a sacrificial victim by means of a public lottery, and does so quite deviously: not until well along in the story do we suspect that the “winner” will be stoned to death by the rest of the villagers.

Organization

The format for literary critiques is fairly standard:

- State your claim(s).
- Forecast your organization.
- Marshal evidence for your claim.
- Reiterate argument and elaborate on its significance.

In English classes, you may be able to assume that your readers are familiar with the work you are critiquing. Perhaps, for example, the entire class is responding to one particular work after some class discussions about it. However, if your instructor asks you to address a broader audience, you may need to provide bibliographical information for the work. In other words, you may need to cite the title, publisher, date, and pages of the work (see [Citing Sources](#)).

Literary critiques are arguments. As such, your instructors expect you to state a claim in your introduction and then provide quotes and paraphrased statements from the text to serve as evidence for your claim. Ideally, your critique will be insightful and interesting. You'll want to come up with an interpretation that isn't immediately obvious. Below are some examples of "thesis statements" or "claims" from literary critiques:

- In "The Yellow Wallpaper," by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the protagonist is oppressed and represents the effect of the oppression of women in society. This effect is created by the use of complex symbols such as the house, the window, and the wall-paper which facilitate her oppression as well as her self expression. ["The Yellow Wall-Paper": A Twist on Conventional Symbols" by Liselle Sant]
- "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Gilman is a sad story of the repression that women face in the days of the late 1800's as well as being representative of the turmoil that women face today. [Critique of "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Brandi Mahon]
- "The Yellow Wallpaper," written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, is a story of a woman, her psychological difficulties and her husband's so-called therapeutic treatment of her ailments during the late 1800s. . . Gilman does well throughout the story to show with descriptive phrases just how easily and effectively the man "seemingly" wields his "maleness" to control the woman. But, with further interpretation and insight I believe Gilman succeeds in nothing more than showing the weakness of women, of the day, as active persons in their own as well as society's decision-making processes instead of the strength of men as women dominating machines. "The View from the Inside" by Timothy J. Decker
- In Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain creates a strong opposition between the freedom of Huck and Jim's life on the raft drifting down the Mississippi River, which represents "nature," and the confining and restrictive life on the shore, which represents "society." ["'All I wanted was a change': Positive Images of Nature and Society in Chapter 19 of Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" from Professor Matthew Hurt's "Sample Essays for English 103: Introduction to Fiction"]
- In Gabriel Garcia Marquez's short story, "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings," an unexpected visitor comes down from the sky, and seems to test the faith of a community. The villagers have a difficult time figuring out just how the very old man with enormous wings fits into their lives. Because this character does not agree with their conception of what an angel should look like, they try to determine if the aged man could actually be an angel. In trying to prove the origin of their visitor, the villagers lose faith in the possibility of him being an angel because he does not adhere to their ordered world. Marquez keeps the identity of the very old man with enormous wings ambiguous to critique the villagers and, more generally, organized religion for having a lack of faith to believe in miracles that do not comply with their master narrative. ["Prove It: A Critique of the Villagers' Faith in 'A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings'" from Sample Essays for English 103: Introduction to Fiction, Professor Matthew Hurt]

Style

Literary criticism is a fairly specialized kind of writing. Instead of writing to a general lay audience, you are writing to members of a literary community who have read a work and who developed opinions about the work—as well as a vocabulary of interpretation.

Following are some common words used by literary critics. More specialized terms can be learned by reading criticism or by referring to a good encyclopedia for criticism or writing, including the *Writer's Encyclopedia*:

- Protagonist: The protagonist is the major character of the story; typically the character must overcome significant challenges.
- Antagonist: The protagonist's chief nemesis; in other words, the character whom the protagonist must overcome.
- Symbols: Metaphoric language; see A Catalogue of Symbols in *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin
- Viewpoint: Stories are told either in the first person or third person point of view. The first person is limited to a single

character, although dialog can let you guess at other characters' intentions. The third person allows readers inside the character's mind so you know what the character feels and thinks. Viewpoint can be "limited," where the character knows less than the reader, or "omniscient," where the reader can hear the thoughts and feelings of all characters. Occasionally writers will use multiple character viewpoint, which takes you from one character's perspective to another.

- Plot: Plots are a series of scenes, typically moving from a conflict situation to a resolution. To surprise readers, authors will foreshadow "false plants," which lead readers to anticipate other resolutions. The term "denouement" refers to the unraveling of the plot in the conclusion.

3.2: Literary Terms - A Guide

Metre

Metre refers to the rhythmic structure of lines of verse. The majority of English verse since Chaucer is **inaccentual-syllabic metre**, which consists of alternating stressed and unstressed syllables within a fixed total number of syllables in each line. The metrical rhythm is thus the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in each line. Groups of syllables are known as metrical **feet**; each line of verse is made up of a set number of feet. Thus:

Monometer: one foot per line

Dimeter: two feet per line

Trimeter: three feet per line

Tetrameter: four feet per line

Pentameter: five feet per line

Hexameter: six feet per line

Heptameter: seven feet per line

Octameter: eight feet per line

Each foot usually consists of a single stressed syllable—though there are some important variations—therefore these patterns correspond to the number of stressed syllables in a line; thus tetrameter has four, pentameter five, etc.

There are two types of metrical feet in English accentual-syllabic metre: **duple metre**, consisting of disyllabic (2-syllable) feet, in which stressed syllables (**x**) and unstressed syllables (**o**) alternate in pairs; and **triple metre**, consisting of trisyllabic (3-syllable) feet, in which single stressed syllables are grouped with a pair of unstressed syllables. Duple metre is the metre most commonly found in English verse.

The following metrical feet make up the most common rhythmical patterns:

Duple metre:

Iamb (iambic foot): **o x**

Trochee (trochaic foot): **x o**

Spondee (spondaic foot): **x x**

Pyrrhus / **dibrach** (pyrrhic foot): **o o**

Triple metre:

Dactyl (dactylic foot): **x o o**

Anapaest (anapaestic foot): **o o x**

Amphibrach: **o x o**

Molossus: **x x x**

Note that the spondee, pyrrhus and molossus do not usually form the basis for whole lines of verse, but are considered forms of **substitution**: that is, when a foot required by the metrical pattern being used is replaced by a different sort of foot. A frequently-found example of substitution is the replacement of the initial iamb in an iambic line by a trochee, e.g. (underlined syllables represent stressed syllables):

In me thou seest the twilight of such day
As after sunset fadeth in the west,
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.

—Shakespeare, Sonnet 73

(The first three lines of this quatrain are perfectly iambic; the initial foot of the fourth line is an example of trochaic substitution, also known as **inversion**.)

Other variations in metrical rhythm include **acephalexis**, in which the first syllable of a line that would be expected according to the regular metre of the line, is lacking; and **catalexis**, in which a line lacks the final syllable expected by its metrical pattern. **Amasculine ending** is a line that ends on a stressed syllable, while a **feminine ending** is a line that ends on an unstressed syllable.

Freeverse is poetry that does not conform to any regular metre.

Examples of different meters and metrical substitutions:

Iambic pentameter:

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers.
For he today that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
This day shall gentle his condition.
Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day.

—Shakespeare, *Henry V*, IV.iii

An example of perfect iambic pentameter. Note the feminine ending in l.1 (in iambic metre a feminine ending adds an extra syllable to the line), and how the stresses follow the sense of the lines.

Trochaic tetrameter:

In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand dare seize the fire?

—Blake, "The Tyger"

The first two lines exhibit masculine endings, and thus are catalectic according to the regular pattern of trochaic metre; that is, they lack their final syllable. Arguably, the second foot in l.4 could be read as a spondaic substitution (if *dare* is stressed).

Spondaic substitution in iambic pentameter (l.3):

Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows,
Em prison her soft hand, and let her rave,
And feeddeep, deep upon her peerless eyes.

—Keats, "Ode on Melancholy"

Pyrrhic substitution in iambic tetrameter (l.2):

The woods are lovely, dark and deep.
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

—Frost, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"

Dactylic dimeter:

Theirs not to make reply,
Theirs not to reason why,
Theirs but to do and die

—Tennyson, "The Charge of the Light Brigade"

Anapaestic metre:

There was an Old Lady of Chertsey,
Who made a remarkable curtsey;
She twirled round and round,
Till she sunk underground,
Which distressed all the people of Chertsey.

—Edward Lear, “There Was an Old Lady of Chertsey”

As is common in limericks, this example includes multiple iambic substitutions, here in the initial syllables of lines 1-3.

Amphibrach:

And now comes an act of enormous enormance!
No former performer’s performed this performance!

—Dr. Seuss, *If I Ran the Circus*

Molossus:

Break, break, break,
On thy coldgraystones, O Sea!
And I would that my tongue could utter
The thoughts that arise in me.

—Tennyson, “Break, Break, Break”

The first line is an example of a molossus; it is also an example of epizeuxis (see below).

Stanzas

When a poem is divided into sections, each section is known as a stanza. Stanzas usually share the same structure as the other stanzas within the poem.

Tercet: a unit or stanza of three verse lines
Quatrain: a unit or stanza of four verse lines
Quintain: a stanza of five verse lines
Sestet: a unit or stanza of six verse lines
Septet or **heptastich:** a stanza of seven lines
Octave: a unit or stanza of eight verse lines
Decastich: a stanza or poem of ten lines

Note that many of these terms refer to a unit of this number of lines within a larger stanza or within a poem not divided into stanzas (e.g. a Shakespearean sonnet, which consists of three quatrains followed by a couplet).

Refrain: a line or lines regularly repeated throughout a poem, traditionally at the end of each stanza. Very often found in ballads; it was also used to great effect by Yeats (see for example ‘The Withering of the Boughs’ or ‘The Black Tower’). Usually nowadays printed in *italic* to distinguish it from the main body of the poem.

Enjambment: when the sense of a verse line runs over into the next line with no punctuated pause. The opposite is known as an **end-stopped** line. An example of enjambment in iambic pentameter:

A dungeon horrible, on all sides round
As one great furnace flamed, yet from those flames
No light, but rather darkness visible

Served only to discover sights of woe

—Milton, *Paradise Lost*, I

Rhyme

End rhyme: rhyme occurring on stressed syllables at the ends of verse lines. The most common form of rhyme. Couplet: a pair of end-rhyming verse lines, usually of the same length. E.g.:

Had we but World enough, and Time,

This coyness Lady were no crime.

We would sit down, and think which way

To walk, and pass our long Loves Day.

—Marvell, "To his Coy Mistress"

Internal rhyme: rhyme occurring within a single verse line.

Crossed rhyme: the rhyming of one word in the middle of a verse line with a word in the middle of the following line.

Half rhyme: also known as **slant rhyme**; an incomplete form of rhyme in which final consonants match but vowel sounds do not. E.g.:

I have heard that hysterical women say

They are sick of the palette and fiddle-bow.

Of poets that are always gay,

For everybody knows or else should know

That if nothing drastic is done

Aeroplane and Zeppelin will come out.

Pitch like King Billy bomb-balls in

Until the town lie beaten flat.

—Yeats, "Lapis Lazuli"

The first quatrain is an example of full end rhyme; the second quatrain an example of half rhyme.

Para-rhyme: a form of half rhyme; when all the consonants of the relevant words match, not just the final consonants. E.g.:

It seemed that out of battle I escaped
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped
Through granites which titanic wars had groined.
Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,
Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.
Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared
With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,
Lifting distressful hands, as if to bless.
And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall, –
By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell.

—Wilfred Owen, "Strange Meeting"

Eye rhyme: a visual-only rhyme; i.e. when spellings match but in pronunciation there is no rhyme, e.g. want/pant, five/give.

Double rhyme: a rhyme on two syllables, the first stressed, the second unstressed. E.g.

I want a hero: —an uncommon want,
When every year and month sends forth a new one,
Till, after cloying the gazettes with can't,
The age discovers he is not the true one
—Byron, *Don Juan*, I.i

The second and fourth lines are double rhymes; the first and third lines are examples of half rhyme/eye rhyme.

Assonance: the recurrence of similar vowel sounds in neighbouring words where the consonants do not match. E.g.:

For the **r**are and **r**adiant **m**a**i**den whom the **a**ngels **n**ame Lenore—
Nameless here for evermore.
—Poe, “The Raven”

Consonance: the recurrence of similar consonants in neighbouring words where the vowel sounds do not match. The most commonly found forms of consonance, other than half rhyme and para-rhyme, are alliteration and sibilance.

Alliteration: the repetition of initial consonants in a sequence of neighbouring words. E.g.:

Hear the loud alarum bells—
Brazen **B**ells!
What a **t**ale of **t**error, now, their **t**urbulency **t**ells!
—Poe, “The Bells”

Sibilance: the repetition of sibilants, i.e. consonants producing a hissing sound. E.g.:

Ships that pass in the night, and speak each other in passing;
Only a signal shown and a distant voice in the darkness
—Longfellow, *Tales of a Wayside Inn*

Blank verse: metrical verse that does not rhyme. Milton's *Paradise Lost* is an example; the majority of Shakespeare is also in blank verse.

Figurative, rhetorical, and structural devices

Metaphor: when one thing is said to be another thing, or is described in terms normally connected to another thing, in order to suggest a quality shared by both. E.g.:

Love, fame, ambition, avarice—'tis the same,
Each idle, and all ill, and none the worst—
For all are meteors with a different name,
And Death the sable smoke where vanishes the flame.

—Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, IV

Simile: when one thing is directly compared with another thing; indicated by use of the words “as” or “like.” E.g.:

I wandered lonely as a cloud

—Wordsworth, “Daffodils”

Metonymy: when something is referred to by an aspect or attribute of it, or by something associated with it. E.g.:

Now is the winter of our discontent

Made glorious summer by this son of York . . .

—Shakespeare, *Richard III*, I.i

Here “winter” and “summer” are examples of metaphor; “son of York” is an example of metonymy, being an attribute of Richard's brother, Edward IV, here the person being referred to.

Synecdoche: a form of metonymy in which something is referred to by a specific part of its whole. “All hands on deck” is an example, in which the crew are being referred to by one specific part—their hands. E.g.:

Take thy face hence.

—Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, V.iii

Personification or **prosopopoeia:** when inanimate objects, animals or ideas are referred to as if they were human. Similar terms are anthropomorphism, when human form is ascribed to something not human, e.g., a deity; and the pathetic fallacy, when natural phenomena are described as if they could feel as humans do. Shelley's ‘Invocation to Misery’ is an example.

Onomatopoeia: a word that imitates the sound to which it refers. E.g. “clang,” “crackle,” “bang,” etc.

Synaesthesia: the application of terms relating to one sense to a different one, e.g., “a warm sound.” For example:

Odours there are . . . green as meadow grass

—Baudelaire, “Correspondences”

Oxymoron: the combination of two contradictory terms. E.g.:

Feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health,

Still-waking sleep that is not what it is!

—Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, I.i

Hendiadys: when a single idea is expressed by two nouns, used in conjunction. E.g. “house and home” or Hamlet's “Angels and ministers of grace” (*Hamlet*, I.iv).

Anaphora: the repetition of the same word or group of words at the beginnings of successive lines or clauses. E.g.:

Is **this** the region, **this** the soil, the clime,

Said then the lost archangel, **this** the seat

That we must change for heaven . . .

—Milton, *Paradise Lost*, I

Epistrophe: the repetition of the same word or group of words at the ends of successive lines or clauses. E.g.:

I know **thee**, I have found **thee**, & I will not let **thee** go

—Blake, “America—a Prophecy”

Epizeuxis: the repetition of a word with no intervening words. E.g., Tennyson’s “Break, break, break,” quoted above.

Polysyndeton: use of more than the required amount of conjunctions. E.g.:

Havoc and spoil and ruin are my gain.

—Milton, *Paradise Lost*, II

The opposite of asyndeton, which refers to the deliberate omission of conjunctions.

Anachronism: when an object, custom or idea is misplaced outside of its proper historical time. A famous example is the clock in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*.

Apostrophe: an address to an inanimate object, abstraction, or a dead or absent person. E.g.:

Busie old foole, unruly Sunne,

Why dost thou thus,

Through windowes, and through curtaines call on us?

—Donne, “The Sunne Rising”

Hyperbole: extreme exaggeration, not intended literally. E.g.:

Since Hero’s time hath half the world been black.

—Marlowe, *Hero and Leander*

Adynaton: a form of hyperbole—a figure of speech that stresses the inexpressibility of something, usually by stating that words cannot describe it. H. P. Lovecraft’s short story “The Unnamable” is essentially a riff on this figure of speech, satirizing Lovecraft’s own regular use of it in his work.

Meiosis: an intentional understatement in which something is described as less significant than it really is. A well-known example is found in *Romeo and Juliet* when Mercutio describes his death-wound as ‘a scratch’ (III.iii).

Litotes: a form of meiosis; the affirmation of something by the denial of its opposite, e.g. “not uncommon,” “not bad.” Erotesis (rhetorical question): asking a question without requiring an answer, in order to assert or deny a statement. E.g.:

What though the field be lost? All is not lost . . .

—*Paradise Lost*, I

In medias res: the technique of beginning a narrative in the middle of the action, before relating preceding events at a later point. *Paradise Lost* is an example (following the convention of epic poetry).

Leitmotif: a phrase, image or situation frequently repeated throughout a work, supporting a central theme. An example is the personification of the mine shaft lift as a devouring creature in Zola’s *Germinal*, repeated throughout the novel. Remember! Simply being able to identify the devices and knowing the terms is not enough. They are only a means to an end. You must always consider: why they are being used, what effect they have, and how they affect meaning(s).

3.3: A Short History of the Early American Novel

While most historians of the modern novel trace its beginnings to Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605, 1616) and its English-language origins are often located in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), the novel did not truly emerge in the United States until the end of the eighteenth century. Critics and historians have offered several reasons for this delay, citing a continuing Puritan distrust of fictional representations, a relative lack of leisure time, and, relatedly, the lack of a large, concentrated group of middle-class readers with substantial enough wealth and time to pursue the genre. Most accounts of the development of the novel, such as Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel*, Michael McKeon's *The Origins of the English Novel* (on England), M. M. Bakhtin's various writings, and Georg Lukács's *Theory of the Novel* (focusing more on the European continent), describe the genre as arising with a number of socioeconomic, religious, cultural, and philosophical factors. In particular, they point to the birth of the middle-class, with its emphasis on social fluidity and individual self-determination; the Protestant Reformation and its appeal to individual interpretation of texts; and the development of scientific and philosophical empiricism with its focus on specific sensual details of life as the ultimate source of knowledge.

From these different factors emerge the novel's distinctive break from earlier long narrative forms such as the epic—its emphasis on everyday people, living their lives in familiar places according to a realistic time frame; its narratives of personal psychological, economic, and social struggle and development; and its close attention to the details of everyday life, including the objects purveyed through the rising commodity culture of which the novel itself was a part. Among other things that set the novel apart from preceding literary forms—perhaps most important, unlike poetry and drama, it was never an oral or performative form—was the fact that from its inception it was a commodity, a work produced for a literary marketplace. In the American context, we can see these connections through Benjamin Franklin's relationship to the novel. While Franklin never wrote a novel and sometimes derided the fine arts, he was the first American printer to publish a novel (Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* in 1742), and he offered one of the most succinct accounts of the novel's attraction in his *Autobiography* in commenting on John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, a Protestant allegory often seen as anticipating many elements of the novel:

Honest John was the first that I know of who mix'd Narration and Dialogue, a Method of Writing very engaging to the Reader, who in the most interesting Parts finds himself as it were brought into the Company, and present at the Discourse. Defoe in his *Crusoe*, his *Moll Flanders* . . . has imitated it with Success. And Richardson has done the same in his *Pamela*, etc. (24).

While many readers now identify “literature” with the novel (most bookstores’ “literature” sections are comprised mainly of novels), most critics in the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries viewed the novel as sub-literary, as merely popular dross. This disdain towards the genre lingered longer, perhaps, in the United States than in most of Western Europe. Especially in the first years of the United States, a variety of critics registered significant concerns about the immoral (or, at best, amoral) nature of the novel. These critics were particularly concerned about what Franklin identified as its chief attraction, its ability to draw readers into the fictive world and make them feel like participants in the action. Samuel Miller, for example, in his *Brief Retrospect of the Eighteenth Century*, abjured that he “has no hesitation in saying, that, if it were possible, he would wholly prohibit the reading of novels For it may, with confidence, be pronounced that no one was ever an extensive and especially an habitual reader of novels, even supposing them to be all well selected, without suffering both intellectual and moral injury” (2:179). During a period when social and political hierarchies were in transition in the wake of the Revolution, the novel's emphasis on individual happiness, on an individual reader's sentiments, and on an individual reader's identification were seen as endangering the future of the young nation.

In response, many early American novels actively positioned themselves against other, less morally upright novels. For example, William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy* (1789), a work often taken to be the first American novel, offers a contrast in his preface to those “novels which expose no particular Vice, and which *recommend* no particular Virtue,” before moving into its epistolary seduction tale in which the moral characters often comment on the detrimental effects of novel-reading (7). Brown's *Power of Sympathy* exemplifies one of the major trends within the development of the early American novel—the use of seduction plots to elicit readers' sympathy and warn them of the dangers of straying even the least bit from moral propriety. Perhaps the most popular novel of the era was Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1791). Although first published in England (when Rowson resided there), the novel was immediately popular in the United States (where Rowson soon moved). Through the text, the reader follows the title character from being ensconced in a girls' school in England to being seduced by a soldier on his way to fight against the American revolutionaries to her pregnancy and death in New York. Republished repeatedly throughout the nineteenth century, *Charlotte Temple* exemplified the appeal the novel made specifically to women readers, an appeal that male critics often attacked or derided.

While sentimental works such as *Charlotte Temple* were perhaps the most popular fare among early American novel-readers,

the most prominent novelist of the early period in the critical tradition is Charles Brockden Brown. Brockden Brown produced a series of four gothic novels between 1798 and 1800 (and two more sentimental ones in 1800–1801) before giving up novel-writing altogether. In these works, which would be read avidly by some British romantics and picked up by early-nineteenth-century American critics as a first glimmer of a national literature, Brown explores the dark side of the American nation and the human psyche. In his first novel, *Wieland* (1798), for example, he tells the story of an apparently model family that is destroyed through madness and murder when a stranger employing his ventriloquism skills throws their assumptions about one another and the world into turmoil. Often seen as prefiguring later themes explored by later American writers, Brown's attention to the psychological, political, and economic influence of American society and nature on his characters marked a new development.

Only somewhere around one hundred American novels were published before 1820, but in the decade that followed, nearly that many again would be published, with the 1830s, 40s, and 50s seeing an explosion in the number of American novels. Even as elite critics continued to express concerns about the morality of the novel, readers would make the novel the most popular genre of the antebellum period. In fact, the novel would come not just to dominate but also, in many ways, to define the literary marketplace. The exponential growth in the production of novels paralleled that of the American literary marketplace, and both depended on the same socio-economic factors—increasing literacy rates due to the expansion of public education; improvements in printing technology, including the steam-powered press and the use of stereotype plates; and what has been called the transportation revolution, with roads, canals, and eventually railroads, tying far-flung urban publishing centers to the outskirts of the nation. The 1820s saw the emergence of the United States' first critically and economically successful novelist with James Fenimore Cooper. After writing an Austen-esque novel of manners, Cooper turned to historical fiction, following in the footsteps of Sir Walter Scott, whose *Waverly* novels had become incredibly popular in both Europe and the United States in the 1810s (and whose novels would remain quite popular in the U.S. through the Civil War). After writing *The Spy* (1821), a novel set during the American Revolution, Cooper penned the first of the Leatherstocking Tales, *The Pioneers* (1823), beginning one of the most successful novel series in American literary history and introducing his most famous character, Natty Bumppo. In *The Pioneers* and *The Last of the Mohicans* (along with several other works), Cooper would depict the decline and disappearance of Native Americans from the nation. Often taking an elegiac tone, these works depicted some Native Americans as noble savages, nearly as role models for the Euro-American characters attempting to make their way in the new world. At the same time, however, they embraced the idea of the Native Americans' inexorable, if regrettable, withdrawal from the nation.

While Cooper's accounts are most famous, the theme of the “vanishing” Native American appeared widely in American literature of the 1820s and 1830s (and later), across numerous genres, from long epic poems (Eastburn and Sands, *Yamoyden* [1820]); drama (Stone, *Metamora* [1829]); and autobiography (*Black Hawk* [1833]). It was the novel that gave the fullest shape to this narrative. In recent years, critics and historians have begun to explore a broader range of texts that develop this theme, including sentimental texts such as Lydia Maria Child's *Hobomok* (1824) and Catharine Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie* (1827) and gothic ones such as John Neal's *Logan* (1822). While these different works offer alternative conceptions of the relationship between gender and race and sometimes more equivocal visions of the future of the U. S., they tend to share the idea that Native Americans have already all but disappeared from the American landscape. The great irony, of course, was that this period saw the election of Andrew Jackson (1828), with his program of Native American removal. While novels portrayed the Native American's disappearance as a *fait accompli*, Jackson and other politicians worked to make sure it actually happened.

The antebellum decades (1830s–1850s) saw not only the immense expansion of the market for novels in the United States but also the further development of specific genres. Critics throughout most of the twentieth century focused on the artistic achievement of a few novelists during this period, especially Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville. Various read in terms of their interest in the romance (with its greater imaginative range) as opposed to the novel or their darker romanticism (as opposed to the transcendentalist optimism of Emerson and Thoreau), or their deep exploration of human psychology, Hawthorne and Melville seemed to anticipate the modernist emphasis on symbolic layering, linguistic complexity, and ambiguous truths that would dominate critical thought for most of the twentieth century. However, in recent decades, American literary historians have increasingly attended to the vast variety amongst the novels produced during this period. In particular, they have investigated more popular genres, including domestic sentimental literature and sensational gothic and urban fictions. Even more recently, scholars have begun to distinguish the work and popularity of religious novels, reform novels, and regional fictions that deployed sentimental, sensational, and symbolic modes to differing extents. At the time of the Civil War, the novel was still seen by most American critics as inferior to poetry, as a less significant artistic form. Similarly, while concerns about the morally enervating effects of the novel had largely dissipated, even such classic works as Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* were still often judged in terms of their morality (or lack thereof). American novelists still found themselves often disparaged or overlooked in favor of their British counterparts. At the same time, the novel had secured its place within American culture, with authors increasingly offering artistic (and moral and political) defenses of the form in its various guises.

4: CHAPTER 4

4.1: How to Interpret a Short Story

4.2: Approaching Poetry

4.1: How to Interpret a Short Story

A short story has a structure and a message. Can you analyze the picture below in much the same way as a short story?



Figure 4.1.1: Old Fence.

What Is a Short Story?

A short story is a work of short, narrative prose that is usually centered around one single event. It is limited in scope and has an introduction, body, and conclusion. Although a short story has much in common with a novel (See How to Analyze a Novel), it is written with much greater precision. You will often be asked to write a literary analysis. An analysis of a short story requires basic knowledge of literary elements. The following guide and questions may help you:

Setting

Setting is a description of where and when the story takes place. In a short story, there are fewer settings compared to a novel. The time is more limited. Ask yourself the following questions:

- How is the setting created? Consider geography, weather, time of day, social conditions, etc.
- What role does setting play in the story? Is it an important part of the plot or theme? Or is it just a backdrop against which the action takes place?

Study the time period, which is also part of the setting, and ask yourself the following:

- When was the story written?
- Does it take place in the present, the past, or the future?
- How does the time period affect the language, atmosphere or social circumstances of the short story?

Characterization

Characterization deals with how the characters in the story are described. In short stories, there are usually fewer characters compared to a novel. They usually focus on one central character or protagonist. Ask yourself the following:

- Who is the main character?
- Are the main character and other characters described through dialogue – by the way they speak (dialect or slang for

instance)?

- Has the author described the characters by physical appearance, thoughts and feelings, and interaction (the way they act towards others)?
- Are they static/flat characters who do not change?
- Are they dynamic/round characters who DO change?
- What type of characters are they? What qualities stand out? Are they stereotypes?
- Are the characters believable?

Plot and structure

The plot is the main sequence of events that make up the story. In short stories the plot is usually centered around one experience or significant moment. Consider the following questions:

- What is the most important event?
- How is the plot structured? Is it linear, chronological or does it move around?
- Is the plot believable?

Narrator and Point of view

The narrator is the person telling the story. Consider this question: Are the narrator and the main character the same?

By point of view, we mean from whose eyes the story is being told. Short stories tend to be told through one character's point of view. The following are important questions to consider:

- Who is the narrator or speaker in the story?
- Does the author speak through the main character?
- Is the story written in the first person "I" point of view?
- Is the story written in a detached third person "he/she" point of view?
- Is there an "all-knowing" third person who can reveal what all the characters are thinking and doing at all times and in all places?

Conflict

Conflict or tension is usually the heart of the short story and is related to the main character. In a short story there is usually one main struggle.

- How would you describe the main conflict?
- Is it an internal conflict within the character?
- Is it an external conflict caused by the surroundings or environment the main character finds himself/herself in?

Climax

The climax is the point of greatest tension or intensity in the short story. It can also be the point where events take a major turn as the story races towards its conclusion. Ask yourself:

- Is there a turning point in the story?
- When does the climax take place?

Theme

The theme is the main idea, lesson, or message in the short story. It may be an abstract idea about the human condition, society, or life. Ask yourself:

- How is the theme expressed?
- Are any elements repeated and therefore suggest a theme?

- Is there more than one theme?

Style

The author's style has to do with the his or her vocabulary, use of imagery, tone, or the feeling of the story. It has to do with the author's attitude toward the subject. In some short stories, the tone can be ironic, humorous, cold, or dramatic.

- Is the author's language full of figurative language?
- What images are used?
- Does the author use a lot of symbolism? Metaphors (comparisons that do not use "as" or "like") or similes (comparisons that use "as" or "like")?

Your literary analysis of a short story will often be in the form of an essay where you may be asked to give your opinions of the short story at the end. Choose the elements that made the greatest impression on you. Point out which character/characters you liked best or least and always support your arguments.

4.2: Approaching Poetry

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Have an awareness of the role of analysis to inform appreciation and understanding of poetry;
- Be able to identify and discuss the main analytical concepts used in analyzing poetry.

This reading is designed to develop the analytical skills you need for a more in-depth study of literary texts. You will learn about rhythm, alliteration, rhyme, poetic inversion, voice and line lengths and endings. You will examine poems that do not rhyme and learn how to compare and contrast poetry.

What is the point of analyzing poetry? One simple answer is that the more we know about anything the more interesting it becomes: listening to music or looking at paintings with someone who can tell us a little about what we hear or see – or what we’re reading – is one way of increasing our understanding and pleasure. That may mean learning something about the people who produced the writing, music, painting that we are interested in, and why they produced it. But it may also mean understanding why one particular form was chosen rather than another: why, for example, did the poet choose to write a sonnet rather than an ode, a ballad, or a villanelle? To appreciate the appropriateness of one form, we need to be aware of a range of options available to that particular writer at that particular time. In the same way, we also need to pay attention to word choice. Why was this particular word chosen from a whole range of words that might have said much the same? Looking at manuscript drafts can be really enlightening, showing how much effort was expended in order to find the most appropriate or most evocative expression.

ACTIVITY 4.2.1

Read William Blake’s “The Tyger” and compare the two versions of the poem. The one on the left is a draft, the other is the final published version.

Tyger, Tyger, burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
[Could] [Dare] frame thy fearful symmetry?
[In what] [Burnt in] distant deeps or skies
[Burnt the] [The cruel] fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand dare seize the fire?
And what shoulder & what art
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat
What dread hand & what dread feet
[Could fetch it from the furnace deep
And in the/thy horrid ribs dare steep
In the well of sanguine woe?
In what clay and in what mould
Were thy eyes of fury roll'd?]
[What] Where the hammer? [What] Where the chain?
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? What [the arm]
[arm][grasp] [clasp] dread grasp?
[Could] Dare its deadly terrors [clasp] [grasp] clasp?
Tyger, Tyger, burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What Immortal hand [or] & eye
Dare [form] frame thy fearful symmetry?

Tiger, tiger burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?
In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand dare seize the fire?
And what shoulder and what art
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? And what dread feet?
What the hammer? What the chain?
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? What dread grasp
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?
When the stars threw down their spears
And watered heaven with their tears,
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?
Tiger, tiger, burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

Discussion

The most obvious difference between the two is that stanza 4 of the draft does not survive in the published version, and an entirely new stanza, “When the stars threw down their spears,” appears in the finished poem. Significantly, this introduces the idea of “the Lamb,” a dramatic contrast to the tiger, as well as the idea of a “he” who made the lamb. One similarity between the draft and final version is that each is made up entirely of unanswered questions. But if you look at the manuscript stanza 5, you can see revisions from “What” to “Where,” and the struggle with the third line, where Blake eventually decided that the idea of an arm was redundant, subsumed in the notions of grasping and clasping. The two rhyme words are decided—grasp/clasp—but in which order should they come? ‘Clasp’ is a less aggressive word than ‘grasp’; ‘clasp’ is not quite as gentle as an embrace, but it is closer to embracing than ‘grasp’ is – so it must be for deliberate effect that we end up with ‘What dread grasp/Dare its deadly

terrors clasp?

It is rare to have manuscript drafts to examine in this way, but I hope that this convinces you of the kind of attention writers pay to word choice. Let us take one more example. Think about this first stanza of Thomas Hardy's 'Neutral Tones' (1867):

We stood by a pond that winter day,
And the sun was white, as though chidden of God,
And a few leaves lay on the starving sod;
—They had fallen from an ash, and were gray.

(Gibson, 1976, p. 12)

Notice that, in the last line, 'oak' or 'elm' would work just as well as far as the rhythm or music of the line is concerned, but 'ash' has extra connotations of grayness, of something burnt out, dead, finished ('ashes to ashes', too, perhaps?), all of which contribute to the mood that Hardy conveys in a way that 'oak' or 'elm' wouldn't.

To return to my original question then, 'what is the point of analyzing poetry?', one answer is that only an analytical approach can help us arrive at an informed appreciation and understanding of the poem. Whether we like a poem or not, we should be able to recognize the craftsmanship that has gone into making it, the ways in which stylistic techniques and devices have worked to create meaning. General readers may be entirely happy to find a poem pleasing, or unsatisfactory, without stopping to ask why. But

studying poetry is a different matter and requires some background understanding of what those stylistic techniques might be, as well as an awareness of constraints and conventions within which poets have written throughout different periods of history.

You may write poetry yourself. If so, you probably know only too well how difficult it is to produce something you feel really expresses what you want to convey. Writing an essay presents enough problems – a poem is a different matter, but certainly no easier. Thinking of poetry as a discipline and a craft that, to some extent, can be learned, is another useful way of approaching analysis. After all, how successful are emotional outpourings on paper? Words one might scribble down in the heat of an intense moment may have some validity in conveying that intensity, but in general might they not be more satisfactory if they were later revised? My own feeling is that a remark Wordsworth made 200 years ago has become responsible for a number of misconceptions about what poetry should do. In the Preface to a volume of poems called *Lyrical Ballads* (1802) he wrote that 'all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' (Owens and Johnson, 1998, p.85, 11.105–6). The second time he uses the same phrase he says something that I think is often forgotten today: 'poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion *recollected in tranquillity*' (my italics) (ibid., p. 95, ll.557–8). Notice the significant time lapse implied there – the idea that, however powerful or spontaneous the emotion, it needs to be carefully considered before you start writing. He goes on:

The emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation is gradually reproduced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. In this mood successful composition generally begins.

You don't have to agree with Wordsworth about what poetry is or how best to achieve it. (Would you always want a poem to express powerful emotion, for example? I referred to Hardy's 'Neutral Tones' above, where the whole point is that neither of the two characters described feels anything much at all.) But the idea of contemplation is a useful and important one: it implies distance, perhaps detachment, but above all re-creation, not the thing itself. And if we try to re-create something, we must choose our methods and our words carefully in order to convey what we experienced as closely as possible. A word of warning though: writers do not always aim to express personal experiences; often a persona is created.

The poet Ezra Pound offered this advice to other poets in an essay written in 1913: 'Use no superfluous word, no adjective, which does not reveal something' (Gray, 1990, p. 56). And in the 1950s, William Carlos Williams advised, 'cut and cut again whatever you write'. In his opinion, the 'test of the artist is to be able to revise without showing a seam' (loc. cit.). That sewing image he uses appeals to me particularly because it stresses the notion of skilled craftsmanship. Pound and Williams were American, writing long after Wordsworth, but, as you can see, like countless other poets they too reflected very seriously on their own poetic practice. I hope this helps convince you that as students we owe it to the poems we read to give them close analytical attention.

Note About Organization

In what follows, section headings like 'Rhyme', 'Rhythm', 'Line lengths and line endings', 'Alliteration', and so on, are intended to act as signposts to help you (if terms are unfamiliar, look them up in the glossary at the end). But these headings indicate only the *main* technique being discussed. While it is something we need to attempt, it is very difficult to try to isolate devices in this way – to separate out, for example, the effects of rhythm from rhyme. This doesn't mean that we shouldn't look for particular techniques at work in a poem, but we need to be aware that they will be interdependent and the end product effective or not because of the way such elements work together.

As you work through this reading, don't be discouraged if your response to exercises differs from mine. Remember that I had the advantage of choosing my own examples and that I've long been familiar with the poems I've used. On a daily basis, we probably read much less poetry than we do prose. This is perhaps one reason why many people say they find poetry difficult – unfamiliarity and lack of practice. But, like anything else, the more effort we put in, the wider the range of experiences we have to draw on. I hope that when you come across an unfamiliar extract in the discussions that follow you might decide to look up the whole poem on your own account, widening your own experience and enjoying it too.

Remember that language changes over the years. I've deliberately chosen to discuss poems from different periods, and given dates of first publication. Do keep this in mind, especially as you may find some examples more accessible than others. The idiom and register of a poem written in the eighteenth century will usually be quite different from one written in the twentieth. Different verse forms are popular at different times: while sonnets have been written for centuries, they were especially fashionable in Elizabethan times, for example. Don't expect to find free verse written much before the twentieth century.

If you are working on a poem, it can be a good idea to print it, maybe even enlarge it, and then write anything you find particularly striking in the margins. Use highlighters or colored pens to underline repetitions and link rhyme words. Patterns may well emerge that will help you understand the way the poem develops. Make the poems your own in this way, and then, if you are the kind of person who doesn't mind writing in books, you can insert notes in a more restrained way in the margins of your book.

If you prefer to work on your computer, you can do a similar thing by using an annotation tool on your word processor.

Whatever you do, always ask yourself what the effect of a particular technique that you identify is. Noticing an unusual choice of words, a particular rhyme scheme or use of alliteration is an important first step, but you need to take another one. Unless you go on to say why what you have noticed is effective, what it contributes to the rest of the poem, how it endorses or changes things, then you are doing less than half the job. Get into the habit of asking yourself questions, even if you can't always answer them satisfactorily.

Rhythm

All speech has rhythm because we naturally stress some words or syllables more than others. The rhythm can sometimes be very regular and pronounced, as in a children's nursery rhyme – 'JACK and JILL went UP the HILL' – but even in the most ordinary sentence the important words are given more stress. In poetry, rhythm is extremely important: patterns are deliberately created and repeated for varying effects. The rhythmical pattern of a poem is called its meter, and we can analyze, or 'scan' lines of poetry to identify stressed and unstressed syllables. In marking the text to show this, the mark '/' is used to indicate a stressed syllable, and 'x' to indicate an unstressed syllable. Each complete unit of stressed and unstressed syllables is called a 'foot', which usually has one stressed and one or two unstressed syllables.

The most common foot in English is known as the iamb, which is an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one (x /). Many words in English are iambic: a simple example is the word 'forgot'. When we say this, the stresses naturally fall in the sequence:

x /
'forgot'.

Iambic rhythm is in fact the basic sound pattern in ordinary English speech. If you say the following line aloud you will hear what I mean:

x / x / x / x / x / x /
I went across the road and bought a pair of shoes.

The next most common foot is the trochee, a stressed syllable (or ‘beat’, if you like) followed by an unstressed one (/x), as in the word

/ x
‘mountain’.

Both the iamb and the trochee have two syllables, the iamb being a ‘rising’ rhythm and the trochee a ‘falling’ rhythm. Another two-syllable foot known as the spondee has two equally stressed beats (/ /), as in

/ /
‘blue spurt’.

Other important feet have three syllables. The most common are the anapest (x x /) and the dactyl (/ x x), which are triple rhythms, rising and falling respectively, as in the words

x x / / x x
‘unimpressed’ and ‘probably’.

Here are some fairly regular examples of the four main kinds of meter used in poetry. (I have separated the feet by using a vertical slash.) You should say the lines aloud, listening for the stress patterns and noting how the ‘beats’ fall on particular syllables or words.

Iambic meter

x / x / x / x / x /
The cur- | few tolls | the knell | of part- | ing day

Trochaic meter

/ x / x / x /
Tiger | tiger | burning | bright

Anapestic meter

x x / x x / x x / x x /
She is far | from the land | where her young | hero sleeps

Dactylic meter

/ x x / x x / x x / x x
Woman much | missed how you | call to me, | call to me

The other technical point that you need to know about is the way the lengths of lines of verse are described. This is done according to the number of feet they contain, and the names given to different lengths of lines are as follows:

monometer	a line of one foot
dimeter	a line of two feet
trimeter	a line of three feet
tetrameter	a line of four feet
pentameter	a line of five feet
hexameter	a line of six feet
heptameter	a line of seven feet
octameter	a line of eight feet.

By far the most widely used of these are the tetrameter and the pentameter. If you look back at the four lines of poetry given as examples above, you can count the feet. You will see that the first one has five feet, so it is an iambic pentameter line; the second one has four feet, so it is a trochaic tetrameter line; the fourth and fifth also have four feet, so are anapestic and dactylic tetrameter lines respectively. Lines do not always have exactly the 'right' number of beats. Sometimes a pentameter line will have an extra 'beat', as in the famous line from *Hamlet*, 'To be or not to be: that is the question', where the 'tion' of question is an eleventh, unstressed beat. (It is worth asking yourself why Shakespeare wrote the line like this. Why did he not write what would have been a perfectly regular ten-syllable line, such as 'The question is, to be or not to be'?)

Having outlined some of the basic meters of English poetry, it is important to say at once that very few poems would ever conform to a perfectly regular metrical pattern. The effect of that would be very boring indeed: imagine being restricted to using only iambic words, or trying to keep up a regular trochaic rhythm. Poets therefore often include trochaic or anapestic or dactylic words or phrases within what are basically iambic lines, in order to make them more interesting and suggestive, and to retain normal pronunciation. Here is a brief example from Shakespeare to show you what I mean. I have chosen a couple of lines spoken by Rosalind in

As *You Like It*, Act 1, scene 2, and have marked this first version to show you the basic iambic meter:

x / x / x / x / x /
My fa- | ther loved | Sir Row- | land as | his soul,
x / x / x / x / x /
And all | the world | was of | my fa | ther's mind.

If you say the lines out loud in this regular way you can hear that the effect is very unnatural. Here is one way the lines might be scanned to show how the stresses would fall in speech (though there are other ways of scanning them):

/ / x / x x x x x /
My father loved Sir Rowland as his soul,
x / x / x x x / x /
And all the world was of my father's mind.

It must be emphasized that there is no need to feel that you must try to remember all the technical terms I have been introducing here. The purpose has been to help you to become aware of the importance of rhythmic effects in poetry, and it can be just as effective to try to describe these in your own words. The thing to hang on to when writing about the rhythm of a poem is that, as Ezra Pound put it, 'Rhythm MUST have meaning': 'It can't be merely a careless dash off with no grip and no real hold to the words and sense, a tumty tum tumpty tum tum ta' (quoted in Gray, 1990, p. 56). There are occasions, of course, when a tum-ty-ty-tum rhythm may be appropriate, and 'have meaning'. When Tennyson wrote 'The Charge of the Light Brigade', he recreated the sound, pace, and movement of horses thundering along with the emphatic dactyls of 'Half a league, half a league, half a league onward / Into the valley of death rode the six hundred'. But for a very different example, we might take a short two-line poem by Pound himself. This time there is no fixed meter: like much twentieth-century poetry, this poem is in 'free verse'. Its title is 'In a Station of the Metro' (the Metro being the Paris underground railway), and it was written in 1916:

x x xx x x / / x x /
The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
/ x x x / / /
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Here you can see that the rhythm plays a subtle part in conveying the meaning. The poem is comparing the faces of people in a crowded underground to petals that have fallen onto a wet bough. The rhythm not only highlights the keywords in each line, but produces much of the emotional feeling of the poem by slowing down the middle words of the first line and the final three words of the second.

For our final example of rhythm, I've chosen a passage from Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Criticism* (1711).

ACTIVITY 4.2.2

Take a look at this excerpt from *An Essay on Criticism*. Read it aloud if you can. Listen to the rhythm, and identify why the rhythm is appropriate to the meaning.

Soft is the strain when Zephyr gently blows,
And the smooth stream in smoother numbers flows;
But when loud billows lash the sounding shore,
The hoarse, rough verse should like the torrent roar.
When Ajax strives some rock's vast weight to throw,
The line too labours, and the words move slow:
Not so, when swift Camilla scours the plain,
Flies o'er the unbending corn, and skims along the main.

(Book II, ll.366–73)

Discussion

Pope here uses a basic structure of iambic pentameters with variations, so that the lines sound as if they have a different pace, faster or slower, depending on what is being described. It is not just rhythm that contributes to the effect here: rhyme and alliteration (successive words beginning with the same sound) recreate smooth, rough, slow and swift movement. Rhythm is entirely dependent on word choice, but is also influenced by other interdependent stylistic devices. Pope's lines enact what they describe simply because of the care that has gone into choosing the right words. It doesn't matter if you don't recognise the classical allusions: from the descriptions it is clear that Ajax is a strong man and Camilla is quick and light. If you count the beats of each line, you'll notice that, in spite of the variety of sound and effect, all have five stresses, except the last, which has six. Strangely enough it is the last and longest line that creates an impression of speed. How is this achieved? Try to hear the lines by reading them again out loud.

There is really only one way, and that is through the words chosen to represent movement: the repeated 's' sounds associated with Camilla trip swiftly off the tip of the tongue, whereas Ajax's lines demand real physical effort from mouth, lips, and tongue. You will get a much stronger sense of this if you form the words in this way, even if you are unable to say them out loud. In an exam, for instance, silent articulation of a poem will help you grasp many poetic techniques and effects that may otherwise be missed.

This extract from Pope's *An Essay on Criticism*, like the whole poem, is written in rhyming couplets (lines rhyming in pairs). They confer a formal, regular quality to the verse. The punctuation helps to control the way in which we read: notice that there is a pause at the end of each line, either a comma, a semi-colon, or a full stop. This use of the end-stopped line is characteristic of eighteenth-century heroic couplets (iambic pentameter lines rhyming in pairs), where the aim was to reproduce classical qualities of balance, harmony, and proportion.

Get into the habit of looking at rhyme words. Are any of Pope's rhymes particularly interesting here? One thing I noticed was what is known as poetic inversion. The rhyme 'shore'/'roar' is clearly important to the sound sense of the verse, but the more natural word order (were this ordinary speech) would be 'The hoarse rough verse should roar like the torrent'. Had he written this, Pope would have lost the sound qualities of the rhyme 'shore'/'roar'. He would have had to find a word such as 'abhorrent' to rhyme with 'torrent' and the couplet would have had a very different meaning. He would also have lost the rhythm of the line, in spite of the fact that the words are exactly the same.

Before we leave *An Essay on Criticism*, did you notice that Pope's subject in this poem is really poetry itself? Like Wordsworth, Pound, and William Carlos Williams, all of whom I've quoted earlier, Pope too was concerned with poetry as a craft.

Alliteration

Alliteration is the term used to describe successive words beginning with the same sound – usually, then, with the same letter.

To illustrate this I would like to use a stanza from Arthur Hugh Clough's poem, 'Natura naturans'. There is not enough space to quote the whole poem, but to give you some idea of the context of this stanza so that you can more fully appreciate what Clough is doing, it is worth explaining that 'Natura naturans' describes the sexual tension between a young man and woman who sit next to each other in a railway carriage. They have not been introduced, and they neither speak nor exchange so much as a glance. The subject matter and its treatment is unusual and also extraordinarily frank for the time of writing (about 1849), but you need to know what is being described in order to appreciate the physicality of the lines I quote.

ACTIVITY 4.2.3

Read this stanza from "Natura Naturans" by Arthur Hugh Clough:

Flashed flickering forth fantastic flies,
Big bees their burly bodies swung,
Rooks roused with civic dim the elms,
And lark its wild reveillez rung;
In Libyan dell the light gazelle,
The leopard lithe in Indian glade,
And dolphin, brightening tropic seas,
In us were living, leapt and played:
(Clough, 1890, p.262)

Now, consider the following questions:

1. What is the single most striking technique used, and what are the effects?
2. How would you describe the imagery, and what does it contribute to the overall effect?

Answer available at the end of this section.

Rhyme

If a poem rhymes, then considering how the rhyme works is always important.

Rhyme schemes can be simple or highly intricate and complex; it will always be worth considering why a particular rhyme pattern was chosen and trying to assess its effects.

ACTIVITY 4.2.4

Read "Love from the North" (1862) by Christina Rossetti. What is the poem about, and how does the rhyme contribute to the meaning and overall effect?

I had a love in soft south land,
Beloved through April far in May;
He waited on my lightest breath,
And never dared to say me nay.
He saddened if my cheer was sad,
But gay he grew if I was gay;
We never differed on a hair,
My yes his yes, my nay his nay.
The wedding hour was come, the aisles
Were flushed with sun and flowers that day;
I pacing balanced in my thoughts:
'It's quite too late to think of nay.' –
My bridegroom answered in his turn,
Myself had almost answered 'yea':
When through the flashing nave I heard
A struggle and resounding 'nay'.
Bridesmaids and bridegroom shrank in fear,
But I stood high who stood at bay:
'And if I answer yea, fair Sir,
What man art thou to bar with nay?'
He was a strong man from the north,
Light-locked, with eyes of dangerous grey:
'Put yea by for another time
In which I will not say thee nay.'
He took me in his strong white arms,
He bore me on his horse away
O'er crag, morass, and hairbreadth pass,
But never asked me yea or nay.
He made me fast with book and bell,
With links of love he makes me stay;

Till now I've neither heart nor power

Nor will nor wish to say him nay.

(Sisson, 1984, p.62)

Discussion

'Love From the North' tells a simple story. A woman about to marry one man is whisked away by another, just as she is about to exchange vows. The form of the poem is very simple: the second and fourth lines of each of the eight 4-line stanzas rhyme. More significantly, because the last word of each stanza is 'nay', there is only one rhyme sound throughout. There are more internal rhymes relying on the same repeated sound, however, aren't there? Look at the last lines of stanzas 1, 2, 6, 7, and 8 where 'say' 'nay'; 'nay' 'nay'; 'say' 'nay'; 'yea' 'nay'; and 'say' 'nay' appear. In the second stanza, 'gay' occurs twice in line 2; stanza five and six both have 'yea' in line 3. What is the effect of this?

Do you think the effect might be to help over-simplify the story? Clearly, the woman has doubts about the man from the south's devotion: he 'never dared' to say no to her. He seems to have no will of his own: he 'saddens' when she does, is 'gay' when she is, wants only what she does. On her wedding day, she thinks: 'It's quite too late to think of nay'. But is she any happier with the strong man from the north? Who is he? Has he carried her off against her will? And what exactly do you make of the last stanza? Do the 'links of love' imply a chain? This strong-minded woman who imposed her will on the man from the south has 'neither heart nor power/Nor will nor wish' to say no to the man from the north. Is that good, or bad? And what do you make of the 'book and bell' with which she's made to stay? Certainly, they imply something different from the conventional Christian marriage she was about to embark on in the middle of the poem – witchcraft, perhaps, or magic? And are the words 'Till now' particularly significant at the beginning of line 3 in the last stanza? Might they suggest a new resolve to break free?

How important is it to resolve such questions? It is very useful to ask them, but not at all easy to find answers. In fact, that is one of the reasons I like the poem so much. The language is very simple and so is the form – eight quatrains (or four-line stanzas) – and yet the more I think about the poem, the more interesting and ambiguous it seems. In my opinion, that is its strength. After all, do we always know exactly what we want or how we feel about relationships? Even if we do, is it always possible to put such feelings into words? Aren't feelings often ambivalent rather than straightforward?

It is also worth bearing in mind the fact that the poem is written in ballad form. A ballad tells a story, but it does only recount events – part of the convention is that ballads don't go into psychological complexities. It is likely that Rossetti chose this ancient oral verse form because she was interested in raising ambiguities. But perhaps the point of the word 'nay' chiming throughout 'Love From the North' is to indicate the female speaker saying no to both men – the compliant lover and his opposite, the demon lover, alike? After all, 'nay' is the sound that gives the poem striking unity and coherence.

Keats's 'Eve of St Agnes' (1820) also tells a tale of lovers, but it isn't a ballad, even though the rhyme scheme of the first four lines is the same as Rossetti's quatrains. The stanzas are longer, and the form more complex and sophisticated. The rhyme pattern is the same throughout all 42 stanzas, the first two of which are reproduced for the following activity:

ACTIVITY 4.2.5

Read the first two stanzas of Keats's "Eve of St Agnes." How would you describe the rhyme scheme, and does it seem appropriate for the subject matter?

St. Agnes' Eve – Ah bitter chill it was!
The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold;
The hare limp'd trembling through the frozen grass,
And silent was the flock in woolly fold:
Numb were the Beadsman's fingers, while he told
His rosary, and while his frosted breath,
Like pious incense from a censer old,
Seem'd taking flight for heaven, without a death,
Past the sweet Virgin's picture, while his prayer he saith.
His prayer he saith, this patient, holy man;
Then takes his lamp, and riseth from his knees,
And back returneth, meagre, barefoot, wan,
Along the chapel aisle by slow degrees:
The sculptur'd dead, on each side, seem to freeze,
Emprison'd in black purgatorial rails:
Knights, ladies, praying in dumb orat'ries,
He passeth by; and his weak spirit fails
To think how they may ache in icy hoods and mails.
(Owens and Johnson, 1998, p.380)

Discussion

In comparison to the Rossetti poem the rhyme sounds form complex patterns, don't they? While 'was'/'grass' in the first stanza and 'man'/'wan' in the second do not quite produce a full rhyme (depending on your accent), the first and third lines do rhyme in subsequent stanzas. Using a letter of the alphabet to describe each new rhyme sound, we could describe the pattern like this: a b a b b c b c c (imagine sustaining that intricate patterning for 42 stanzas). This kind of formula is useful up to a point for showing how often the same sounds recur, and it does show how complicated the interweaving of echoing sounds is. But it says nothing about how the sounds relate to what is being said – and, as I have been arguing all along, it is the relationship between meaning and word choice that is of particular interest. To give a full answer to my own question, I'd really need to consider the function of rhyme throughout the poem. It would not be necessary to describe what happens in each stanza, but picking out particular pertinent examples would help me argue a case. With only the first two stanzas to work with, I could say that, if nothing else, the intricate rhyme pattern seems appropriate not only for the detailed descriptions but also for the medieval, slightly gothic setting of the chapel where the holy man prays.

ACTIVITY 4.2.6

Read this extract from Tennyson's "Mariana" (1830). Again, this comes from a longer poem, so it would be useful to look it up and read the rest if you have the opportunity.

With blackest moss the flower-plots
Were thickly crusted, one and all:
The rusted nails fell from the knots
That held the pear to the gable-wall.
The broken sheds looked sad and strange:
Unlifted was the clinking latch;
Weeded and worn the ancient thatch
Upon the lonely moated grange.
She only said, 'My life is dreary,
He cometh not,' she said;
She said, 'I am aweary, aweary,
I would that I were dead!'
(Trilling and Bloom, 1973, p.396)

Now, consider the following questions:

1. Describe the rhyme in the stanza from Tennyson's 'Mariana'.
2. What is the first stanza about?

Answer available at the end of this section.

Poetic Inversion

Poetic inversion, or changing the usual word order of speech, is often linked to the need to maintain a rhythm or to find a rhyme. We noticed Pope's poetic inversion in *An Essay on Criticism* and saw how the rhyme was intimately linked to the rhythm of the verse. The song 'Dancing in the Street', first recorded by Martha and the Vandellas in the 1960s, does violence to word order in the interests of rhyme – 'There'll be dancing in the street/ A chance new folk to meet' – but, because the words are sung to a driving rhythm, we are unlikely to notice how awkward they are. There's a convention that we recognise, however unconsciously, that prevents us from mentally re-writing the line as 'a chance to meet new people'. ('People' rather than 'folk' would be more usual usage for me, but, as with the Pope example, this would mean that the rhythm too would be lost.)

Poems That Don't Rhyme

Are poems that don't rhyme prose? Not necessarily. Virginia Woolf (1882–1941), a novelist rather than a poet, and T.S. Eliot (1888–1965), known particularly for his poetry, both wrote descriptive pieces best described as 'prose poems'. These look like short prose passages since there is no attention to line lengths or layout on the page, as there was, for example, in 'Mariana'. When you study Shakespeare you will come across blank verse. 'Blank' here means 'not rhyming', but the term 'blank verse' is

used specifically to describe verse in unrhyming iambic pentameters.

Although iambic pentameters resemble our normal speech patterns, in ordinary life we speak in prose. You'll notice if you look through Shakespeare's plays that blank verse is reserved for kings, nobles, heroes and heroines. They may *also* speak in prose, as lesser characters do, but commoners don't ever have speeches in blank verse. Shakespeare – and other playwrights like him – used the form to indicate status. It is important to recognise this convention, which would have been understood by his contemporaries – writers, readers, and audiences alike. So choosing to write a poem in blank verse is an important decision: it will elevate the subject. One such example is Milton's epic *Paradise Lost* (1667), a long poem in twelve Books describing Creation, Adam and Eve's temptation, disobedience and expulsion from Paradise. It sets out to justify the ways of God to man, so blank verse is entirely appropriate. This great epic was in Wordsworth's mind when he chose the same form for his autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*.

ACTIVITY 4.2.7

Read and compare these extracts. One is from Book XIII of *The Prelude*, where Wordsworth is walking up Mount Snowdon; the other is from "The Idiot Boy," one of his *Lyrical Ballads*. What effects are achieved by the different forms?

***The Prelude* (1799–1806), Book XIII, ll.29–44**

With forehead bent
Earthward, as if in opposition set
Against an enemy, I panted up
With eager pace, and no less eager thoughts.
Thus might we wear perhaps an hour away,
Ascending at loose distance each from each,
And I, as chanced, the foremost of the Band,
When at my feet the ground appear'd to brighten,
And with a step or two seem'd brighter still,
Nor had I time to ask the cause of this,
For instantly a Light upon the turf
Fell like a flash: I look'd about, and lo!
The Moon stood naked in the Heavens, at height
Immense above my head, and on the shore
I found myself of a huge sea of mist,
Which meek and silent, rested at my feet: ...
(Owens and Johnson, 1998, pp.169–7)

‘The Idiot Boy’ (1798)

’Tis eight o’clock, – a clear March night,
The moon is up, – the sky is blue,
The owlet, in the moonlight air, –
Shouts from nobody knows where;
He lengthens out his lonely shout,
Halloo! halloo! A long halloo!
– Why bustle thus about your door?
What means this bustle, Betty Foy?
Why are you in this mighty fret?
And why on horseback have you set
Him whom you love, your idiot boy?
(Hutchinson, rev. edn 1969, p.100)

Discussion

Both poems use iambic meter – an unstressed followed by a stressed syllable. The extract from *The Prelude* uses iambic pentameters, five metrical feet in each line, whereas ‘The Idiot Boy’ (like the ballad, ‘Love From the North’) is in tetrameters, only four, establishing a more sing-song rhythm. Other stylistic techniques contribute to the difference in tone too: the language of *The Prelude* is formal (Wordsworth’s ‘Ascending’ rather than ‘going up’), whereas ‘The Idiot Boy’ uses deliberately homely diction, and rhyme. Three simple rhyme words ring out throughout the 92 stanzas of the latter: ‘Foy’, ‘boy’ and ‘joy’ stand at the heart of the poem, expressing the mother’s pride in her son. The moon features in each extract. In *The Prelude*, as Wordsworth climbs, the ground lightens, as it does in The Old Testament before a prophet appears. Far from being a meaningless syllable to fill the rhythm of a line, ‘lo’ heightens the religious parallel, recalling the biblical ‘Lo, I bring you tidings of great joy’: this episode from *The Prelude* describes a moment of spiritual illumination. Wordsworth’s intentions in these two poems were quite different, and the techniques reflect that.

Other poems that don’t use rhyme are discussed later (‘Wherever I Hang’; ‘Mona Lisa’; ‘Poem’). Notice that they use a variety of rhythms, and because of that none can be described as blank verse.

Voice

Is the speaker in a poem one and the same as the writer? Stop and consider this for a few moments. Can you think of any poems you have read where a writer has created a character, or persona, whose voice we hear when we read?

Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* was written as an autobiographical poem, but there are many instances where it is obvious that poet and persona are different. Charlotte Mew’s poem, ‘The Farmer’s Bride’ (1916) begins like this:

*Three summers since I chose a maid,
Too young maybe – but more’s to do
At harvest-time than bide and woo.
When us was wed she turned afraid
Of love and me and all things human;*

(Warner, 1981, pp. 1–2)

Mew invents a male character here, and clearly separates herself as a writer from the voice in her poem. Some of the most well-known created characters – or personae – in poetry are Browning's dramatic monologues.

ACTIVITY 4.2.8

Consider the opening lines from three Robert Browning poems. Who do you think is speaking?

From 'Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister' (1842)

Gr-rr – there go, my heart's abhorrence!

Water your damned flower-pots, do!

If hate killed men, Brother Lawrence,

God's blood, would not mine kill you!

(Trilling and Bloom, 1973, p.500)

From 'My Last Duchess' (1842)

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,

Looking as if she were alive...

(Trilling and Bloom, 1973, p.502)

From 'Porphyria's Lover' (1842)

The sun set early in to-night,

The sullen wind was soon awake,

It tore the elm-tops down for spite,

And did its worst to vex the lake:

I listened with heart fit to break.

(Jack and Fowler, 1988, p.250)

Discussion

Well, the first speaker isn't named, but we can infer that, like Brother Lawrence whom he hates, he's a monk. The second must be a Duke since he refers to his 'last Duchess' and, if we read to the end of the third poem, we discover that the speaker is a man consumed with such jealousy that he strangles his beloved Porphyria with her own hair. Each of the poems is written in the first person ('my heart's abhorrence'; 'That's *my* last Duchess'; *I* listened with heart fit to break'). None of the characters Browning created in these poems bears any resemblance to him: the whole point of a dramatic monologue is the creation of a character who is most definitely not the poet. Charlotte Mew's poem can be described in the same way.

Line Lengths and Line Endings

Read the following prose extract taken from Walter Pater's discussion of the *Mona Lisa*, written in 1893, and then complete the activity:

She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants: and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary; and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands.

ACTIVITY 4.2.9

When W.B. Yeats was asked to edit *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892–1935* (1936), he chose to begin with this passage from Pater, but he set it out quite differently on the page. Before you read his version, write out the extract as a poem yourself. The exercise is designed to make you think about line lengths, where to start a new line, and where to end it when there is no rhyme to give you a clue. There is no *regular* rhythm either, though I'm sure you will discover rhythms in the words, as well as repeated patterns. How can you best bring out these poetic features?

Discussion

Of course, there is no right answer to this exercise, but you should compare your version to Yeats's, printed below, to see if you made similar decisions.

*She is older than the rocks among which she sits;
Like the Vampire,
She has been dead many times,
And learned the secrets of the grave;
And has been a diver in deep seas,
And keeps their fallen day about her;
And trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants;
And, as Leda,
Was the mother of Helen of Troy,
And, as St Anne,
Was the mother of Mary;
And all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes,
And lives
Only in the delicacy
With which it has moulded the changing lineaments,
And tinged the eyelids and the hands.*

I wonder whether you used upper case letters for the first word of each line, as Yeats did? You may have changed the punctuation, or perhaps have left it out altogether. Like Yeats, you may have used 'And' at the beginnings of lines to draw attention to the repetitions: nine of the lines begin in this way, emphasising the way the clauses pile up, defining and redefining the mysterious Mona Lisa. Two lines begin with 'She': while there was no choice about the first, beginning the third in the same way focuses attention on her right at the start of the poem. Yeats has used Pater's punctuation to guide his line endings in all but two places: lines 13 and 14 run on – a stylistic device known as enjambment. The effect is an interesting interaction between eyes and ears. While we may be tempted to read on without pausing to find the sense, the line endings and white space of the page impose pauses on our reading, less than the commas and semi-colons that mark off the other lines, but significant nevertheless.

Yeats's arrangement of the words makes the structure and movement of Pater's long sentence clearer than it appears when written as prose. The poem begins with age – she is 'older than the rocks' – and refers to 'Vampire', death, and 'grave' in the first lines. The decision to single out the two words 'And lives' in a line by themselves towards the end of the poem sets them in direct opposition to the opening; we have moved from great age and living death to life. The arrangement of lines 8–11 highlights her links with both pagan and Christian religions: the Mona Lisa was the mother of Helen of Troy and the Virgin Mary. The wisdom and knowledge she has acquired is worn lightly, nothing more than 'the sound of lyres and flutes', apparent only in the 'delicacy'

of colour on 'eyelids and hands'.

The aim of the preceding exercise was to encourage you to think about form and structure even when a poem does not appear to follow a conventional pattern. Because you have now 'written' a poem and had the opportunity to compare it with someone else's version of the same words, you should begin to realise the importance of decisions about where exactly to place a word for maximum effect, and how patterns can emerge which will control our reading when, for example, successive lines begin with repetitions. It should have made you think about the importance of the beginnings of lines, as well as line endings. What has been achieved by using a short line here, a longer one there? How do these decisions relate to what is being said? These are questions that can usefully be asked of any poem.

Earlier, discussing the extract from Pope's *An Essay on Criticism*, I asked you to concentrate on the sound qualities of the poetry. Here, I want you to consider the visual impact of the poem on the page. It is a good thing to be aware of what a complex task reading is, and to be alive to the visual as well as the aural qualities of the verse.

Comparing and Contrasting

Often you will find that an assignment asks you to 'compare and contrast' poems. There's a very good reason for this, for often it is only by considering different treatments of similar subjects that we become aware of a range of possibilities, and begin to understand why particular choices have been made. You will have realised that often in the previous discussions I've used a similar strategy, showing, for example, how we can describe the rhyme scheme of 'Love From the North' as simple once we have looked at the more intricate patterning of Keats's 'The Eve of St Agnes' or Tennyson's 'Mariana'. Anne Brontë's 'Home' and Grace Nichols's 'Wherever I Hang' treat the subject of exile in quite different ways, and looking at one can sharpen our understanding of what the other does.

ACTIVITY 4.2.10

Read the opening lines from these two poems commemorating deaths. What can you explain why they sound so very different?

'Lycidas' (1637) by John Milton

Yet once more, O ye laurels, and once more,
Ye myrtles brown, with ivy never sere,
I come to pluck your berries harsh and crude,
And with forced fingers rude
Shatter your leaves before the mellowing year.
Bitter constraint, and sad occasion dear,
Compels me to disturb your season due;
For Lycidas is dead, dead ere his prime,
Young Lycidas, and hath not left his peer.

(Bush, 1966, p.141)

'Felix Randal' (between 1876 and 1889) by Gerard Manley Hopkins

Felix Randal the farrier, O is he dead then? my duty all ended,
Who have watched his mould of man, big-boned and hardy-handsome
Pining, pining, till time when reason rambled in it and some
Fatal four disorders, fleshed there, all contended?
(Gardner, 1953, p.47)

Discussion

If I had to identify one thing, I would say that the first begins more elaborately and with a more formal tone than the second. 'Felix Randal' tends to use language in an unusual way, but you would probably agree that the first sentence is quite straightforward and sounds colloquial (or informal), as if the speaker has just overheard someone talking about Randal's death and wants to confirm his impression. 'Lycidas' opens quite differently. It is not immediately apparent what evergreens have to do with anything (in fact they work to establish an appropriately melancholy atmosphere or tone), and it isn't until line 8 that we learn of a death. The word 'dead' is repeated, and the following line tells us that Lycidas was a young man. While 'Felix Randal' has an immediacy, the speaker of 'Lycidas' seems to find it hard to get going.

Both poems are elegies – poems written to commemorate death – and both poets are aware of writing within this convention, although they treat it differently.

ACTIVITY 4.2.11

What do the titles of the poems used in Activity 4.2.10 tell us about each poem, and how might they help us understand the different uses of the elegiac convention?

Discussion

I think it would be apparent to most readers that 'Felix Randall' is simply a man's name, while 'Lycidas' is more mysterious. In fact, Lycidas is a traditional pastoral name, but unless you know something about the classical pastoral tradition it might mean very little to you. The young man whose death Milton was commemorating was actually called Edward King, but, at the time he was writing, elegies were formal, public, and impersonal poems rather than private expressions of grief. 'Lycidas' commemorates a member of a prominent family rather than a close friend of the poet's. Over two hundred years later, Hopkins, while working loosely within the same elegiac convention, adapts it. Felix Randal is an ordinary working man, not a public figure. In the seventeenth century, it would have been unlikely that he would have been considered worthy of a poem like this.

If you were making a special study of elegies, there would be a great deal more to say. That's not the idea here, though. The point is that by comparing and contrasting the tone of the opening lines and the titles, and considering when the poems were written, we have come up with a number of significant differences.

ACTIVITY 4.2.12

Read this poem by Robert Browning—*Memorabilia* (1855)—carefully. Who is speaking, and who is being addressed?

Memorabilia (1855)

I

Ah, did you once see Shelley plain,
And did he stop and speak to you,
And did you speak to him again?
How strange it seems and new!

II

But you were living before that,
And also you are living after;
And the memory I started at –
My starting moves your laughter.

III

I crossed a moor, with a name of its own
And a certain use in the world no doubt,
Yet a hand's-breadth of it shines alone
'Mid the blank miles round about:

IV

For there I picked up on the heather
And there I put inside my breast
A moulted feather, an eagle-feather!
Well, I forget the rest.

(Trilling and Bloom, 1973, p.542)

Discussion

From the evidence of the poem, we know that the speaker once walked across a moor, found an eagle's feather, and has a high regard for the poet Shelley (1792–1822). The person being addressed is not named, but we discover that he (or she) once met Shelley, and this alone confers status by association. The word 'you' ('your' in one instance) is repeated in 6 out of the first 8 lines. 'You' becomes a rhyme word at the end of the second line, so when we reach the word 'new' in line four – one of the two lines in the first stanzas that doesn't contain 'you' – the echo supplies the deficiency. 'You' clearly represents an important focus in the first half of the poem, but who exactly is 'you'?

Thinking about this apparently straightforward question of who is being addressed takes us into an important area of critical debate: for each one of us who has just read the poem has, in one sense, become a person who not only knows who Shelley is (which may not necessarily be the case) but lived when he did, met him, listened to him, and indeed exchanged at least a couple of words with him. Each of us reads the poem as an individual, but the poem itself constructs a reader who is not identical to any

of us. We are so used to adopting 'reading' roles dictated by texts like this that often we don't even notice the way in which the text has manipulated us.

ACTIVITY 4.2.13

Now read the Robert Browning poem (Activity 4.2.12) again, this time asking yourself if the speaking voice changes in the last two stanzas, and if the person who is being addressed remains the same.

Discussion

If the first half of the poem is characterised by the repetition of 'you' and the sense of an audience that pronoun creates, then the second half seems quite different in content and tone. The speaker is trying to find a parallel in his experience to make sense of and explain his feeling of awe; the change of tone is subtle. Whereas someone is undoubtedly being addressed directly in the first stanza, in the third and fourth, readers overhear – as if the speaker is talking to himself.

At first, the connection between the man who met Shelley and the memory of finding an eagle's feather may not be obvious, but there is a point of comparison. As stanza 2 explains, part of the speaker's sense of wonder stems from the fact that time did not stand still: 'you were living before that, / And also you are living after'. The moor in stanza 3, like the listener, is anonymous – it has 'a name of its own ... no doubt' – but where it is or what it is called is unimportant: only one 'hand's-breadth' is memorable, the spot that 'shines alone' where the feather was found. The poem is about moments that stand out in our memories while the ordinary daily stuff of life fades. It also acknowledges that we don't all value the same things.

ACTIVITY 4.2.14

Take another look at the Robert Browning poem (Activity 4.2.12). How would you describe its form?

Discussion

The structure of the poem is perfectly balanced: of the four quatrains, two deal with each memory, so, although the nature of each seems quite different, implicitly the form invites us to compare them. Think about the way in which Browning introduces the eagle feather. How does he convince us that this is a rare find?

To begin with, the third and fourth stanzas make up one complete sentence, with a colon at the end of the third announcing the fourth; this helps to achieve a sense of building up to something important. Then we move from the visual image of a large space of moor to the very circumscribed place where the feather is found, but the reason why this 'hand's-breadth' shines out is delayed for the next two lines 'For there I picked up on the heather' – yes? what? – 'And there I put inside my breast' – well? – 'A moulted feather', ah (and notice the internal rhyme there of 'feather' with 'heather' which draws attention to and emphasises the harmony of the moment), and then the word 'feather' is repeated and expanded: 'an eagle-feather' Clearly the feather of no other bird would do, for ultimately the comparison is of eagle to the poet; Browning knows Shelley through his poetry as he knows the eagle through its feather, and that feather presents a striking visual image.

There is an immediacy about the conversational opening of the poem which, I have suggested, deliberately moves into a more contemplative tone, possibly in the second stanza (think about it), but certainly by the third. We have considered some of the poetic techniques that Browning employs to convince us of the rarity of his find in the third and fourth stanzas. You might like to think more analytically about the word sounds, not just the rhyme but, for example, the repeated 'ae' sound in 'breadth' 'heather' 'breast' and 'feather'. What, however, do you make of the tone of the last line? Try saying the last lines of each stanza out loud. Whether you can identify the meter with technical language or not is beside the point. The important thing is that 'Well, I forget the rest' sounds deliberately lame. After the intensity of two extraordinary memories, everything else pales into insignificance and, to reiterate this, the rhythm tails off. While the tone throughout is informal, the last remark is deliberately casual.

Definition: Term

Alliteration available at the end of this section.

Answers

ACTIVITY 4.2.3

1. Visually the use of alliteration is striking, particularly in the first line and almost equally so in the second. If you took the advice above about paying attention to the physical business of articulating the words too, you should be in a good position to discriminate between the rapidity of the flies and the heavier movement of the bees, and to notice how tactile the language is. The effect is actually to create sensuality in the stanza.
2. Notice that though we begin with flies, bees, and rooks, all of which are fairly common flying creatures, we move to the more romantic lark with its 'wild' song, and then to the positively exotic gazelle, leopard, and dolphin. From the rather homely English air (flies, bees, birds), we move to foreign locations 'Libyan dell' and 'Indian glade', and from there to 'tropic seas'. (Cod in the North Sea would have very different connotations from dolphins in the tropics.) Air, earth, and sea are all invoked to help express the variety of changing highly charged erotic feelings that the speaker remembers. The images are playful and preposterous, joyfully expressing the familiar poetic subject of sexual attraction and arousal in a way that makes it strange and new. Notice that in each case the image is more effective because the alliteration emphasizes it.

ACTIVITY 4.2.6

1. As with the Keats poem, the rhyme scheme here is quite complicated. Using the same diagrammatic formula of a letter for each new rhyme sound, we could describe this as 'a b a b c d d c e f e f'. You might notice too that indentations at the beginning of each line emphasise lines that rhyme with each other: usually, the indentations are alternate, except for lines 6 and 7, which form a couplet in the middle of the stanza. It is worth telling you too that each of the stanzas ends with a variation of the line 'I would that I were dead' (this is known as a refrain) so – as in Christina Rossetti's 'Love From the North' – a dominant sound or series of sounds throughout helps to control the mood of the poem.
2. We may not know who Mariana is, or why she is in the lonely, crumbling grange, but she is obviously waiting for a man who is slow in arriving. The 'dreary'/'awearry' and 'dead'/'said' rhymes, which, if you read the rest of the poem, you will see are repeated in each stanza, convey her dejection and express the boredom of endless waiting. As with the stanzas from Keats's 'Eve of St Agnes', there is plenty of carefully observed detail – black moss on the flower-plots, rusty nails, a clinking latch on a gate or door – all of which description contributes to the desolation of the scene and Mariana's mood. Were the moated grange a lively, sociable household, the poem would be very different. Either Mariana would be cheerful, or her suicidal misery would be in sharp contrast to her surroundings. It is always worth considering what settings contribute to the overall mood of a poem.

Definition: Term

The repetition of sounds, usually the first letters of successive words, or words that are close together. Alliteration usually applies only to consonants.

See *under* foot.

The repetition of identical or similar vowel sounds.

Originally a song which tells a story, often involving dialogue. Characteristically, the storyteller's own feelings are not expressed.

A strong pause in a line of verse, usually appearing in the middle of a line and marked with a comma, semi-colon, or a full stop.

A pair of rhymed lines, often used as a way of rounding off a sonnet; hence the term 'closing couplet'.

See *under* foot.

Spoken exchange between characters, usually in drama and fiction but also sometimes in poetry.

A writer's choice of words. Poetic diction might be described, for instance, as formal or informal, elevated or colloquial.

A poem of loss, usually mourning the death of a public figure, or someone close to the poet.

The omission of words from a sentence to achieve brevity and compression.

The use of run-on lines in poetry. Instead of stopping or pausing at the end of a line of poetry, we have to carry on reading until we complete the meaning in a later line. The term comes from the French for 'striding'.

A long narrative poem dealing with events on a grand scale, often with a hero above average in qualities and exploits.

Witty, condensed expression. The closing couplet in some of Shakespeare's sonnets is often described as an epigram.

A unit of meter with a pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables. In the examples that follow, a stressed syllable is indicated by '/', and an unstressed syllable by 'x': anapest: xx/; dactyl: /xx; iamb: x/; spondee: //; trochee: /x.

Iambic pentameter lines rhyming in pairs, most commonly used for satiric or didactic poetry, and particularly favoured in the eighteenth century.

See *under* foot.

A line consisting of five iambs.

Special use of language in a way that evokes sense impressions (usually visual). Many poetic images function as mental pictures that give shape and appeal to something otherwise vague and abstract; for example, 'yonder before us lie/Deserts of vast Eternity'. Simile and metaphor are two types of imagery.

An image in which one thing is substituted for another, or the quality of one object is identified with another. The sun, for Shakespeare, becomes 'the eye of heaven'. (From the Greek *metron*, 'measure') measurement of a line of poetry, including its length and its pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables. There are different meter in poetry. Most sonnets, for example, written in English are divided into lines of ten syllables with five stresses – a measure known as pentameter (from the Greek *pente* for 'five'). The sonnet also tends to use a line (known as the iambic line) in which an unstressed syllable is followed by a stressed one, as in this line: 'If I should die, think only this of me'. Most sonnets then are written in iambic pentameter.

The telling of a series of events (either true or fictitious). The person relating these events is the narrator. However, it is often more usual in poetry to refer to 'the speaker'.

Group of eight lines of poetry, often forming the first part of a sonnet.

A poem on a serious subject, usually written in an elevated formal style; often written to commemorate public events.

A word that seems to imitate the sound or sounds associated with the object or action, for example, 'cuckoo'.

A poem in eight-line stanzas, rhyming a b a b a b c c.

Writing about something not human as if it were a person, for example, 'Busy old fool, unruly Sun,/Why dost thou thus,/Through windows and through curtains call onus?'.

Reversing the order of normal speech in order to make the words fit a particular rhythm, or rhyme, or both.

Double meaning or ambiguity in a word, often employed in a witty way. Puns are often associated with wordplay.

A group of four lines of poetry, usually rhymed.

A line or phrase repeated throughout a poem, sometimes with variations, often at the end of each stanza.

An echo of a similar sound, usually at the end of a line of poetry. Occasionally, internal rhymes can be found, as in: 'Sister, my sister, O *fleet, sweet* swallow'.

A pattern of rhymes established in a poem. The pattern of rhymes in a quatrain, for instance, might be 'a b a b' or 'a b b a'.

The pattern of beats or stresses in a line creating a sense of movement.

A group of six lines of poetry, often forming the second part of a sonnet.

An image in which one thing is likened to another. The similarity is usually pointed out with the word 'like' or 'as': 'My love is like a red, red rose'.

Fourteen iambic pentameter lines with varying rhyme schemes.

See *under* foot.

A single unit of pronunciation. 'Sun' is one syllable; 'sunshine' is two syllables.

A group of three lines in poetry, sometimes referred to as a triplet.

See *under* foot.

A distinctive movement of change in mood or thought or feeling. In the sonnet, the turn usually occurs between the octave and the sestet, though the closing couplet in Shakespeare's sonnets often constitutes the turn.

An intricate French verse form with some lines repeated, and only two rhyme sounds throughout the five three-line stanzas and the final four-line stanza.

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